

Sarasa Nagase

ILLUSTRATION BY
Mai Murasaki

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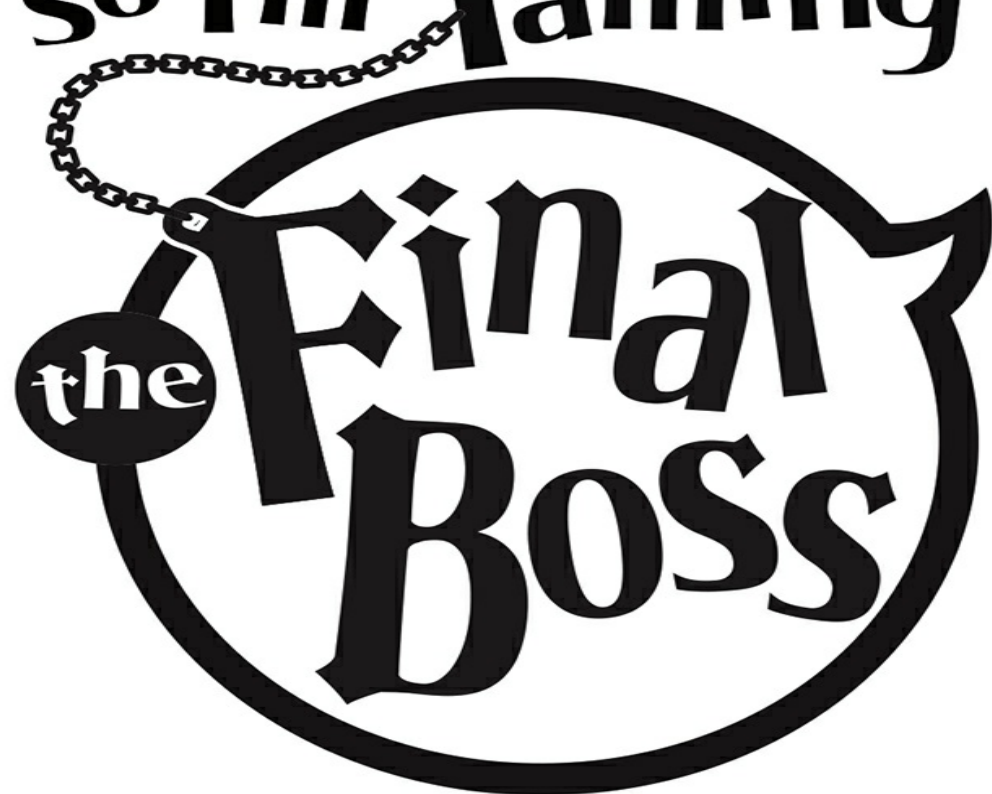


I'm the
VILLAINESS,
so I'm Taming

the **Final
Boss**



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VILLAINESS,
so I'm Taming



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New York

Copyright

I'M THE VILLAINESS, SO I'M TAMING THE FINAL BOSS, Vol. 6

Sarasa Nagase

Translation by Taylor Engel

Cover art by Mai Murasaki

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AKUYAKU REIJO NANODE LAST BOSS O KATTE MIMASHITA Vol. 6

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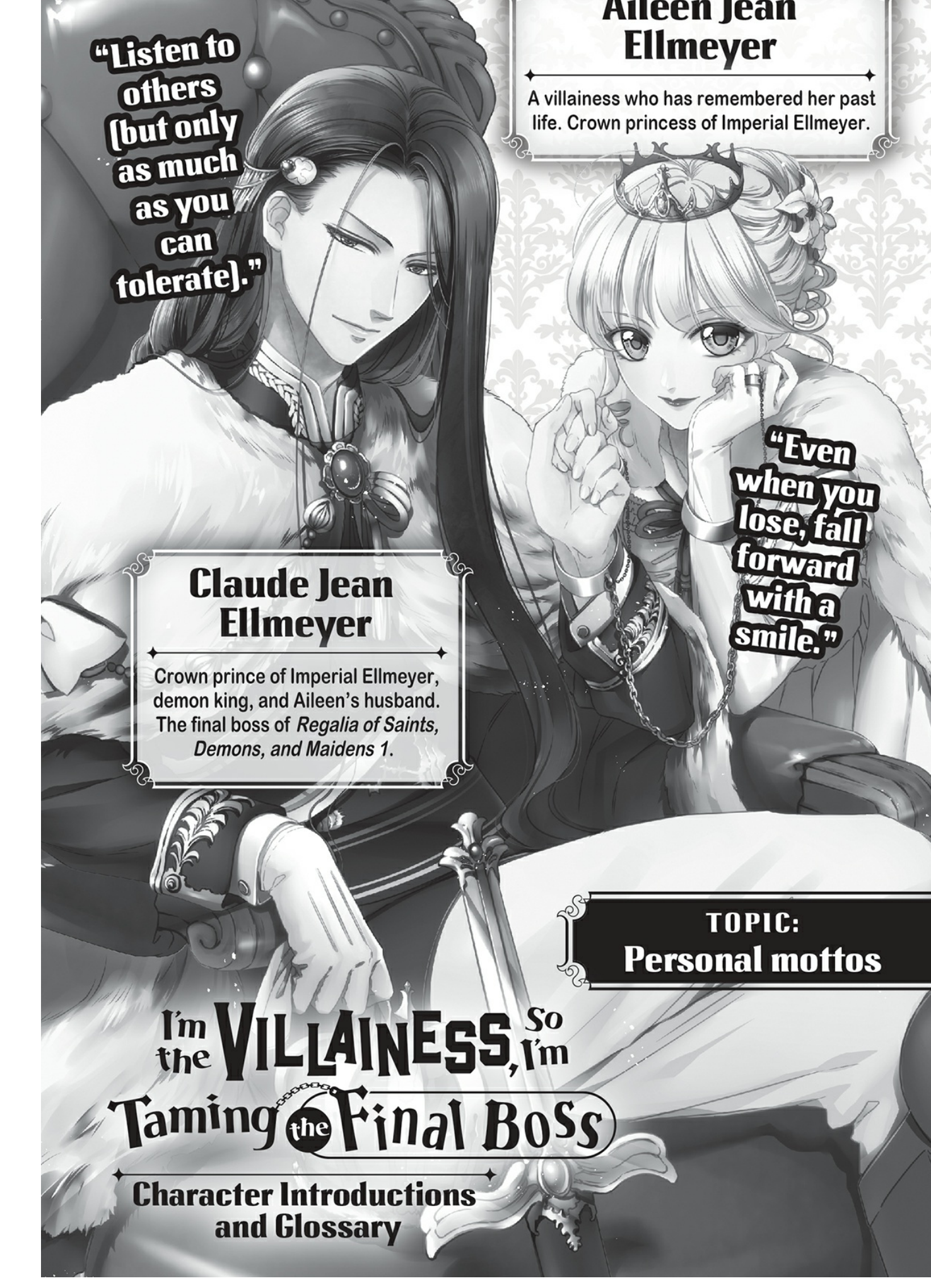
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**"Listen to
others
(but only
as much
as you
can
tolerate)."**

Aileen Jean Ellmeyer

A villainess who has remembered her past life. Crown princess of Imperial Ellmeyer.

Claude Jean Ellmeyer

Crown prince of Imperial Ellmeyer, demon king, and Aileen's husband. The final boss of *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens 1*.

**"Even
when you
lose, fall
forward
with a
smile."**

**TOPIC:
Personal mottos**

I'm the **VILLAINESS**, So I'm
Taming the Final Boss

**Character Introductions
and Glossary**

The Story Thus Far

When her engagement is broken, memories of Aileen's past life surface, and she realizes she's been reincarnated into the world of an *otome* game as its villainess. To escape destruction, she decides to romance Claude, the final boss! After many twists and turns, Aileen becomes Claude's consort, the crown princess. Then Luciel, the final boss of the fourth game in the series, appears and tells her, "You two are not meant to be. Divorce." On top of that, a royal candidate from the Queendom of Hausel turns Claude into a dragon, and he becomes a demon...! This is the tale of a villainess's fight to secure a happy ending that doesn't exist in the game, conquering all the final bosses who stand in her way.

Claude's Advisers



Keith Eigrid

"Humans can be demons."



Beelzebuth

"No one is stronger than the king."



Almond

"Demon King Love-Love Dance."



Rachel Danis

"Be as good as your word."

Serena Gilbert

"Hold on to your ideals."



Aileen's Ladies-in-Waiting

**Imperial Ellmeyer
and the
Oberon Trading Firm**



Jasper Varie

“If you can’t beat ‘em,
join ‘em.”

Isaac Lombard

“Actions speak louder
than words.”



Denis

“Just make it.”

Luc

“Live within your limits.”



Quartz

“Repay kindness.”

James Charles

“Live a decent life.”



Auguste Zelm

“Get along with everyone.”

Walt Lizanis

“Never cut and run.”



Kyle Elford

“Provide for old age.”

Elefas Levi

“Even the lowliest are living creatures.”



Claude and Aileen's Siblings-in-Law



Lilia Reinoise

"Boost your favorites
whenever possible."

Cedric Jean Ellmeyer

"Nothing is scarier than my brother."



Baal Shah Ashmael

"Don't panic; don't cower;
don't let them get away."

Roxane Fusca

"Victory goes to the swift."



Ares Emir Ashmael

"I can't anger my wife."

Sahra

"Learning is important!"



The Kingdom of Ashmael

The Queendom of Hausel



Amelia Dark

"Be the author of your
own destiny."



Luciel

"Love is pain."

Grace Dark

"Believe in
yourself."



Demon Realm

✦ Intermission ✦

The Villainess's Death Flag

"It's very nice to meet you, Lady Aileen. I'm Lilia Reinoise!"

The girl had cheerfully greeted her in the hall, bringing a frown to Aileen's face. The girl's introduction gave her a good idea of what was happening here.

She'd heard previously that the daughter of Baron Reinoise had been found. He reportedly doted on her a great deal, and he'd donated a lot of money to the academy she was currently attending to enhance her reputation. However, perhaps because the girl had been raised as a commoner, much of her behavior was inappropriate in high society. For better or worse, she stood out.

"Um, I've been coming to this school since last month. They told me you were the most important girl here, Lady Aileen, and that I should greet you. So, um, the pleasure's mine."

This was the most glaring example to date. At this academy, Aileen's rank was second only to the imperial family, and yet this girl had dared to bar her way, addressed her without permission, and—incredibly—reached out for a handshake.

"...I see. So you were advised to come and greet me."

"Yes!"

The eager response made her head hurt.

Spats among the aristocracy tended to be the veiled sort, and the idea of *considerate harassment* was rampant.

For example, someone had clearly thought it would be amusing if this mannerless baron's child angered the daughter of Duke d'Autriche. The students around them were watching, holding their breath, but a few smirking individuals hung back, using the others to screen themselves. No doubt they had been this girl's helpful advisers.

Sighing, Aileen smacked the girl's extended hand lightly, batting it away. For

what it was, the gesture had been rather gentle, but Lilia looked perplexed.

“I am the one who decides whether or not we will be friends.”

“...Oh, yes, of course. I’ve been overly familiar, haven’t I? Sorry.”

“I assume you understand that I outrank you, yes? You are not to speak to me unless I explicitly allow it. Remember that.”

“Huh? But Cedric said I wouldn’t need to worry about that...”

The abrupt mention of Aileen’s fiancé made her frown. In the same moment, she began to suspect that the true target of harassment had been her all along.

Prince Cedric was apparently being quite attentive to the eccentric baron’s daughter. Demonstrating how the crown prince could be tolerant of even an ill-mannered girl could help raise his reputation. That wouldn’t be such a bad thing for Aileen as his future wife.

However, did the fact that the people around them were egging her on like this mean that the situation was being interpreted in an indecent light? That was a problem.

Master Cedric is kind... I’ll have to warn her not to impose on him.

She did wonder what Marcus was thinking, but the knights’ basic creed was “Treat ladies chivalrously.” Perhaps this job was too much for that stick-in-the-mud.

“Prince Cedric may have said that, but I am clearly telling you otherwise.”

“It sounds as if you’re implying that you outrank me.”

“...Prince Cedric.” Aileen’s fiancé looked displeased, and she realized she’d chosen her words poorly. As long as she explained properly, surely he would understand. “I think nothing of the sort. I am your fiancée, after all. However, that doesn’t mean I shall overlook your errors.”

“...My errors, hmm? That’s right. You really are an outstanding fiancée.”

His slightly shadowed expression was concerning. Still, he’d acknowledged Aileen’s correction, so he must be aware that he’d allowed the baron’s daughter to do something that was technically improper.

Relieved, Aileen curtsied respectfully to Cedric like the model young noblewoman she always strove to be. Attracting more attention would be a poor move.

“Thank you for your understanding. I will work hard so I can continue to be worthy of such praise. Now if you’ll excuse me, Lady Lilia. Good day to you.”

“Oh— Yes, g-good day to yah.”

Nerves had made her tongue slip. Aileen looked less than amused, while Cedric’s stern expression dropped away as he burst out laughing.

She decided to let him take care of the rest. Now Lilia’s impropriety would be remembered as nothing more than an amusing little anecdote.

Alone, she climbed the stairs to the academy’s roof. Once there, she was finally able to breathe deeply. Between school starting again and everything else, her nerves were recently being strained quite often.

Master Cedric does tend to become unpredictable at this time of year...

Before his engagement to Aileen, Cedric had become crown prince during this season of meetings and partings. She’d been told it was also springtime when his older half brother had renounced his claim to the throne and left the imperial castle.

If only he hadn’t been the demon king was a common refrain by now. Cedric’s brother had been a terribly brilliant person. Even Aileen’s father had praised him freely, and that hardly ever happened.

However, Aileen was aware that all of this had made Cedric feel inferior. The baron’s daughter didn’t know about that tangled history. No doubt that explained his mild treatment of her.

“Still, that doesn’t mean he’ll be forgiven for behavior that’s unsuitable for a crown prince.”

She’d exchanged only a few words with the baron’s daughter, but the girl had been charming. Oblivious, artless, and sweet. Aileen had sensed no malice in her whatsoever.

And yet, for some reason, she couldn’t dismiss her out of hand.

That was the most frightening sort of woman there was.

Perhaps I should be careful.

She stroked the roof's balustrade softly. Looking up, she noticed the vast sea of trees behind the castle.

The demon king's forest.

She thought Cedric was too concerned about his half brother. No matter how brilliant the man was, he'd quit the castle. In Aileen's opinion, it would be much more productive to live in the present and focus on what lay ahead instead.

Of course, Aileen would have been lying if she'd claimed to have absolutely no interest in Cedric's brother. After all, if he wasn't the demon king, she would have been engaged to him. However, if even she were distracted by the man, how would Cedric feel?

And so she paid him no heed.

Granted, she would have liked to meet him if she hadn't been Cedric's fiancée. It would have been thrilling to see demons, too.

Giggling to herself at the childish fancy, she gazed into the distance.

Her eyes rested on the demon king's forest, which would never be part of her life.

"I'm sure there's no respectable reason to meet a demon king, though."

That's right. I never intended to meet him.

But then Cedric broke off their engagement, and Lilia pulled the rug out from under her and became his new fiancée. Just as that happened, Aileen regained those ridiculous memories of her past life. She'd learn that this was the world of an *otome* game she had played before, that she was living the life of none other than the game's villainess, who was doomed to be casually killed off. As a result, she wound up paying a visit to the notorious man who became her second love. Not long after, they were engaged, then married, and she became his wife... She never would've dreamed that any of these things would come to pass.

"Master Claude..." Looking up from Marcus's back, she calls her husband's

name.

His form has been twisted into a black dragon, a grotesque demon. She's sure he hasn't heard her.

I never thought I'd end up loving you so much that, even now, I can't give up.

◆ Sixth Act ◆

The Villainess's Love Is Not Enough

At the demon king's old castle in the depths of the forest, the barrage of flashes and explosions shows no sign of abating.

"Good grief. He lost so much strength to the sacred sword, and he's still... His magic is completely ridiculous," Baal mutters in amazement. His barriers are canceling out every blast of magic the demon king spits at him.

"Hey, demon king's guards. Protect us."

"But..."

"If you are his retainers, harbor no delusions about what you must do."

Baal shoots Aileen a glance, and both Walt and Kyle follow his gaze. She's currently astride Marcus's back, furiously thinking even though the blood loss seems to have dulled her wits.

Sacred power isn't suited to combat. All it can do is negate magic; it has no offensive ability. It was intended to protect humans from demons, not for use in battle.

And the holy king is practically its symbol.

In short, even though Baal has appeared from the magic circle generated by Isaac's bullet and Claude has been transformed into a dragon, Baal can't defeat him—the best he can do is force him into the demon realm, then seal the entrance.

As Sahra heals the holy sword wound on Aileen's right shoulder, she considers the significance of that. In other words, when Isaac collaborated with the Queendom of Hausel and pared down its arsenal of holy swords, the end goal of his plan had been— Before she can put it into words, Baal launches himself into the air, taking Walt and Kyle with him.

"Wait, Master Baal!"

“Oh—you mustn’t move! A holy sword inflicted this wound, so it’s nearly impossible to close...!”

“Never mind...me... I must save...Master Claude,” Aileen mumbles.

Rebuffing Sahra’s attempt to heal her, Aileen tries to clamber down from Marcus’s back. Just then, she sees a figure poised to strike at Baal. It’s that woman.

The Queendom of Hausel’s royal candidate who introduced herself as Grace Dark.

“You aren’t needed here, Holy King.”

“Archers, now!” Lester shouts, and a volley of arrows hurtles at Grace.

Just as the woman turns to them, her face still hidden by her veil, the arrows burn to ash.

Only one person could have been responsible.

“Master Claude?”

Torn wings patched by magic, the demon king stands between them, defending the bloodstained bride.

Why would Master Claude protect her?

Aileen’s unspoken question is answered by loud laughter from none other than the woman he’s protected.

“Come to think of it, the blade I absorbed a moment ago was *the sacred sword of the demon king’s wife*, wasn’t it? Perhaps that helped him realize who this face belongs to? Just before the oath is fulfilled, I swear— How vexing.”

In contrast to those sharp words, she smirks with her red lips.

“Still, that is a thought. I suppose I could let you two meet at last.” Lightly stepping in front of Claude’s snout, the woman continues in a voice that’s astonishingly sweet. “Since everything you wanted is mine now.”

“Don’t listen to her, Demon King!”

Baal casts a barrier between Claude and the woman. Instantly, Claude begins to struggle as if he doesn’t want to be separated from her. Tangling him in a net

of sacred power, Baal shouts, “That woman lost her right hand without shedding a drop of blood! She’s obviously nothing decent!”

“Don’t be mean. Hey, Luciel. You know me, right? I’m Grace—your wife.”

The woman’s tone changes abruptly.

“Save me, Luciel. I’ll die if you don’t. Killed by humans, again— See?”

Slowly, she removes her own head.

A gust snatches the veil away. Freed from its pins, her black hair streams in the wind. The eyes are closed, and the woman holds up the severed head, like the remains of a criminal.

The bizarre sight petrifies everyone.

“Don’t you care if I die, Luciel?”

Claude—no, the demon king—howls. By sheer brute force, he tears free from Baal’s bindings, spitting ferocious magical flames as he goes.

“Ahhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!” The woman laughs as she reattaches her head.

“Come now, Demon King! Destroy them all! Then I’ll create the correct future you dreamed of. A future with me!”

“We won’t accept you as the demon king’s wife.” A shadow soars in: It’s James, who’s grown wings.

The woman snorts derisively. A blade of light extends from her wrist, where her right hand should be. “You can’t think a mere cambion stands a chance against the sacred sword?”

“That sword doesn’t work on humans, though!” Switching places with James, Auguste blocks the woman’s blade with a holy sword.

The woman laughs. “Oh, but mine kills humans as well.”

Her sword grazes Auguste’s cheek. Aileen’s eyes go wide at the spray of red blood. The sacred sword wounded a human?

No... Even in the game, that never...

“This one is real. That’s what that means. It’s allowed to pass judgment even

on humans!”

“Auguste!” James has circled around behind the woman, and he swipes at her with his claws. The woman clicks her tongue in irritation. She hasn’t quite managed to get the train of her bridal costume out of the way, and shreds of fabric are sent flying.

The woman moves to Claude’s side, and once again, holy swords appear behind her. There are significantly fewer of them, but the woman picks one up with her left hand and holds it high. Claude almost seems to interpret this as a signal and opens his mouth wide.

Baal turns around, shouting, “The rest of you, take cover! We’ll block this!”

“...Master Claude!”

Marcus dutifully falls back, and Aileen takes this opportunity to dart forward.

“Master Claude, it is I—Aileen!”

“Ailey, no, get back!”

“I am your wife, Master Claude! Not her!!”

She screams it with all her might.

Sadly, Claude looks right at her and emits a blast of magic.

Both the magical attack and several holy swords fly at her like a hammer of judgment. Baal deploys layer upon layer of barriers, intercepting everything. The blinding light and the impact of the explosive blast still bring Aileen to her knees.

Master...Claude...

She won’t get through to him. She understands that with devastating clarity.

Without the sacred sword, she’s just Aileen, and the demon king won’t hear her screams.

“What do you think you’re doing? You’re in the way; get that through your head already. Get back here!” Serena drags her away by the arm.

Sahra, who scrambled after her, looks pale. “Y-your wound’s reopened... Please hold still, okay?”

“Hey, you over there. Take the wounded and fall back, fast!” Lester, who’s been running around giving orders, peers down at her. “If we’re here, we’ll just get in the holy king’s way, Your Highness. Daughter of God, you in particular we cannot allow to be caught. You’re the seal for that right hand; it’s time for you to leave. Cedric, starting now, you and I will go lay the groundwork with other nations. Hurry—”

“You’re going to seal Master Claude in the demon realm, aren’t you?”

At Aileen’s murmur, a hush falls over the rest of the group.

It’s the opposite of what happened in Ashmael. At this rate, the Queendom of Hausel will be lauded for slaying the demon king. Once that happens, it’s only a matter of time before they devour Ellmeyer. Given that outcome, then even if it means losing Claude, the empire’s best move is to seal the demon king away themselves.

If they don’t, given that she’s the demon king’s wife, Aileen’s beheading will be the very first order of business.

“...It may only buy us time, but this is our best move.” Before anyone else can speak, Lester bluntly confirms her suspicions. His hair is messy, his shirttail is torn after getting caught on something, and his leather shoes are caked in mud.

Has he always been this sort of character? Looking him straight in the eye, Aileen asks, “Was that Isaac’s idea?”

“I believe Isaac Lombard should be the one to answer that. The Fenrirs have extricated him from the rubble. They say he’s badly injured, but he’s still breathing.”

“I see... I imagine Master Baal was an accomplice as well.”

Walt and Kyle are desperately trying to stop Claude, while James and Auguste are trying to keep the woman in check. Aileen is almost certain they all anticipated this situation.

“They told me nothing and acted without permission...”

“With all due respect, Your Highness, they—”

“I know. They were being considerate. Not only that, their plan was flawless.

This was the best possible move. Only...what if we can't find a way to return Master Claude to normal?"

There's no answer. Aileen laughs at herself; she's asked something far too obvious.

The wicked demon king is sealed, peace returns to the world, and everyone lives happily ever after.

That's how every game is supposed to end.

"Hang on. You mean there's absolutely no way to change the demon king back?" Serena frowns.

Aileen responds softly, "I've heard that if the sacred sword were complete... But I have no idea how to do that, or what it means."

"A-a complete sacred sword...? Oh, you mean we should fix it, like the holy sword? In that case, is there something I could do to help? ...W-without risking my life, I mean."

"I really doubt it." Lilia approaches, and although her steps are light, her voice is firm. "With both the sacred and the holy swords, the power of love is what really matters."

"The power of love? Listen, you, does spouting nonsense seem like a good idea right now?!"

"Oh, but it's true. Even Lady Aileen knows it. Don't you?"

Since this is the world of the *otome* game *Regalia of Saints, Demons, and Maidens*, the power of love is what brings forth miracles. That's a given.

"The demon king's destined love isn't Lady Aileen, though. Even if she did have a complete sacred sword, it wouldn't be enough to get through. Let's see... If I'd been the one to love Prince Claude, we might have had a chance."

"Lilia! This is no time for jokes."

"I'm not joking. It's true, isn't it, Lady Aileen? No matter how much you love the demon king, there's no point. That's how the game is set up." Aileen is still on her knees, and Lilia bends down, whispering in her ear, "You can't change him back. After all, you're just the villainess."

Aileen digs her nails into the dirt, leaving gouges in the earth as she squeezes her fists. Then she grabs the neck of Lilia's dress with those dirty hands.

If this woman had ever truly loved Claude, she might have been able to transform him now. She's the true heroine, and in this moment, Aileen would give anything to have her power. Instead, she spits out a demand. "Give me the sacred sword."

Lilia snorts. "What, are you planning a suicide charge? You think if you put yourself in danger, that'll bring him to his senses? You disappoint me, Lady Aileen. That sort of gameplay goes against my code."

"You're the player, aren't you? Then help me win!!"

Lilia blinks her large eyes, startled. The motion seems strangely warped. It definitely isn't because Aileen is crying. She doesn't have time for tears.

"I'm aware of my limits. I know I can't change Master Claude back! What of it? As if I'd give up on him over something so trivial!"

"....."

"There must be *something*, some way to make this work. After everything that's happened, for it all to be destroyed by—by a thing like—"

As if a world so ridiculous could be allowed to exist! Tightening her grip on Lilia's dress, Aileen screams at her, "I'm the villainess?! That's not a reason to lose! Whether I win or lose, it will happen because I am myself!!"

Behind her, there's an explosion, and Claude howls. Aileen turns around and spots him sinking, crushed beneath the holy king's barrier.

"Master Claude...! Wait, Master Baal!"

Overhead, Baal has cast an enormous magic circle. For just a moment, he glances at Aileen, but his eyes promptly return to Claude. There's a trace of a smile on his face. "Have no fear. We won't allow you to become a monster who devours your wife."

"Stay out of this!"

Shaking free of James and Auguste, the woman hurls a holy sword at Baal. It sends Walt and Kyle flying, and its tip bites into Baal's side. However, Baal

doesn't waver.

Converting even his own gushing blood into sacred power, he swings both arms down.

"We will stop you, Claude."

The holy king creates a seal with his blood, pouring all his strength into it. No mere demon king could hope to fight this.

Aileen puts out a hand, reaching for Claude. He screams, but his cry cuts out as the barrier falls into place.

What appears is a pillar of sacred ice to seal the demon king. With a series of cracking noises, the black scales turn to silvery white, freezing over everything in a cleansing wave.

Then, finally, it shatters.

"Master...Claude..."

An unseasonable frost scatters like flower petals. It sparkles and gleams like water, reflecting the sunlight lancing through the dark clouds.

No, it's not true... It can't be true.

As Aileen stares, stunned, the white mist clears. She gasps, eyes widening.

Claude is there, his limbs trapped in the pillar of ice that rises in front of the old castle.

He's human again.

"Master Claude!!"

She comes very close to tripping over herself, but she forces her legs to move properly and breaks into a run. Her path takes her across the slippery ice, heels pounding.

Claude's frost-rimmed eyelashes tremble as his eyes slowly open. *What lovely red eyes.*

When they focus on her, his expression grows soft.

"...Aileen?"

It's really him. For a moment she stops in her tracks, and then she clings to him.

"Master Claude, I'm so glad...! D-do you recognize me?"

"...Yes. My wife."

His answer makes her throat close up.

Then she sees it.

Under the ice at their feet, something writhes. A black, pulsing, ominous thing is lurking just underneath the surface.

Claude has noticed it, too, and he murmurs, "...I see. So the true form had me... Ah. That was rather considerate of the holy king."

Even as he speaks, the thing squirming inside the ice coils around his legs.

It's the true form. It lost the struggle against the holy king's barrier and has been trapped in the ice, but now it's fighting, trying to take him over again.

"That wasn't on purpose. Since you're human, your earring resonated, and you managed to split temporarily, that's all. It won't last long," Baal says in a matter-of-fact tone while holding his side.

Aileen gulps. Claude forces a smile. "I see... No, probably not. At this rate, we'll just end up back where we started."

"What are you saying...? Master Claude!"

"Aileen. Get away from me."

"I refuse!" she says without hesitation.

Before her very eyes, the black thing twines around Claude's wrists inside the ice. Tightening her grip on his chest, she shrieks, "I won't let go! Never! I'll save you, so—so—"

"I'll be fine, Aileen. You needn't worry. I'll come back to you."

"D-don't think you can fool me like that! How, exactly? If you're sealed in the demon realm, how do you intend to come back if you're not even human anymore?"

“I’m thinking about that right now. I’m fairly certain it’ll work out somehow.”

“You careless, irresponsible— At a time like this!”

“Aileen, please understand. I don’t want to be used this way.” Taken aback, Aileen looks up. Claude’s long, silky hair falls against her cheek. “This is mine. This body and everything about it. My pride won’t let her do as she pleases.”

“Master Claude...”

“It’s all right. You are my only wife.”

The true form has thrust its way through the ice, and it’s already coiling around Claude’s neck. Claude flashes a dry smile. “What, you’re angry? You don’t even recognize your beloved wife, you pathetic fool— Don’t make me laugh. You didn’t even manage to destroy the world. All you did was cling to your wife, hoping to be reunited with her someday while you lived a wretched existence.”

Claude looks up. Luciel is floating in midair, looking as if he might burst into tears. “Claude. Come home to the demon realm with me, all right?” Slowly, as if he’s mulling over the words, he repeats himself. “Even if it’s no good now, we might find a way to send you back here as a human someday. So—”

“I refuse. I won’t gamble on ‘someday.’”

Luciel gulps, then hangs his head.

Slowly, Claude’s eyes return to Aileen. “Don’t forget me. Don’t doubt me. I swear I’ll return to you.”

“...Master Claude?”

“I love you. My sweet Aileen.”

Claude is able to teleport anything he sees.

Whether Aileen or even the Maid of the Sacred Sword herself, if he can catch them off guard, there are few exceptions. In the blink of an eye, he can send them to safety, far from the old castle.

When he opens his eyes again, the only ones still present are the holy king and the woman in the bloody bridal gown.

Them, and the true form currently trying to engulf him.

Looking down at it, Baal murmurs, "Is that enough, then?"

"Of course it's not."

Baal's eyebrows twitch. He speaks dispassionately, sacred power flooding from his right hand. "For the sake of our kingdom, the world, and our beloved wife, we can't let the demon king run loose."

"I know that. However, you'll allow me to deceive *my* beloved wife, won't you?"

Those violet eyes blink.

Claude exhales, thinking of the last look he had of his wife's face.

She was crying, wasn't she?

An irresistible thrill runs through his heart, but at the same time, he realizes something.

He likes making her cry. However, there's no point if he isn't the one who wipes away those tears.

A new crack appears in the ice, and the true form slithers out of it, wrapping around him.

When she sees that, the bloody woman comes close to him in an overly familiar way. "I won't let the holy king seal you. You will fulfill your true destiny."



“Destiny, hmm? What a ridiculous idea,” Claude sneers.

The true form tightens around him, as though it’s checking him. The demon king is pathetically brave, and as Claude speaks to it, his voice holds both contempt and self-mockery. “This woman isn’t your wife.”

“Goodness, of all the things to say. I’m—”

“Well, I do understand. It makes sense that you don’t want to damage your wife’s corpse.” The woman’s fingers twitch, falling still against his cheek. Her fingertips are as cold as ice. “You hurt my wife, though. That makes us even.”

The true form begins moving with terrible speed, trying to take Claude in. It must be desperate to recoil from reality. It can’t bear the fact that its wife is no longer here or anywhere.

That was why it had prayed and wished and hoped against hope. Even now, with its oath transformed into a curse and the woman taking advantage of it, it refuses to face the truth.

Claude does pity it. That must have been agonizing. If his own wife came home as a severed head, he wouldn’t want to see it or admit it was real, either.

I won’t be like you, though.

As ever, what matters are the choices made in the here and now.

When he looks up, trying to see the sky, the woman’s face fills his vision.

The face of Luciel’s wife. Does that make her his mother? He wonders if he got his straight black hair from her.

“It’s all right. You’ll understand soon. I am your wife, just as the oath said.”

“Don’t touch me. That’s revolting.”

The woman’s eyes fly open.

It’s too late, though. The true form has realized what Claude’s about to do, but it won’t make it in time, either. Baal screams. “Claude! What are you—?”

“See this through to the end, Baal.”

He’d never thought he’d have a friend close enough to call by his first name

with such familiarity. He'd never thought he'd be blessed with a wife, a woman he loved with all his heart. These things came to him out of the blue.

That's why he's sure the unexpected is still waiting for him in his future as well.

He ignites his magic from the inside. The true form is linked to it; its scream is swallowed by the condensing light, and then the explosion pulverizes it, along with Claude's mocking thoughts.

Just as Aileen looks back at the old castle, a surge of magic rises, flaring up in the blinding shape of a cross for an instant before it explodes. The ensuing blast of wind rushes at her like a wave, buffeting her as she looks down from the cliff top.

She doesn't understand what's happened.

Luciel is the first one to move. "...Claude. No, it's not true. It can't be true."

"Father?!"

"There's no way that would be allowed. You can't destroy yourself like that!"

Luciel vanishes. He's probably gone to the epicenter.

Behind her, Lilia murmurs, "Did the demon king actually blow himself up and take the true form with him? Oh— Lady Aileen, wait! I'll go wi—"

Standing around and speculating will get them nowhere. Aileen rises to her feet, intending to jump off the cliff and leave Lilia behind.

However, the shadow that falls over her makes her hesitate, then leap back. A ferocious gust of wind slices off the edge of the cliff. As it falls away, the woman appears from the cloud of dust.

There are holes in her bridal costume. More alarming are the holes in her torso, and yet she's still moving.

Impossible. As everyone stands petrified with astonishment and fear, the woman screams.

"—Return...my right haaaaaand!"

She races past Aileen and Lilia like a gale, threading her way through everyone

Claude has teleported. When she reaches Sahra at the very back, she thrusts her hand into her stomach.

Sahra screams, but the woman's deranged shriek is even louder. "How dare he, how *dare* he?! Does he hate me that much?! But it's *me*! I am his true destiny. He actually blew himself up to reject me— Ha-ha, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes, of course, that's the spirit!"

"Ah...ah..."

"As if I'd let you go just because you destroyed yourself! Don't think you can deny me so easily; you must still be alive, so we'll meet again. You won't get away from me like that. It's just a little longer, just a little more! Don't you dare mock me— Theeere it is, found it!"

Smirking, the woman sits astride the Daughter of God, groping around inside her stomach. There's no blood: she's using her sacred power to search Sahra's body for the right hand she'd sealed inside it.

Regardless, it's a grotesque sight that genuinely does seem like she's tearing through Sahra's entrails. The others stand there frozen as the woman begins to draw her hand back out, but Sahra catches it. "N-no. I won't..."

"What?"

"I won't...give this to you." Large tears spill from her eyes. "Ares...tried so hard."

A bark of laughter escapes the woman's rouge-smeared lips. Then she yanks her hand free with a tense *snap-snap-snap*, as if she's tearing through blood vessels. "What, do you fancy yourself a tragic heroine? You, a Daughter of God whose only talent is letting others use her!"

"Sahra!"

Serena is the first to move, striking at the woman's neck with a dagger. The woman dodges, sneering, and as she fits her reclaimed right hand back into place, her body begins to repair itself.

Sahra has fainted, and Serena puts an arm around her shoulders, pulling her up. As she does, the woman who calls herself Grace manifests a holy sword

from her right palm and raises it high before making one final comment.

“Get lost, trash.”

Auguste pulls both girls into his arms, shielding them, while Aileen puts herself between him and the woman. The fact that she doesn't have the sacred sword doesn't even occur to her.

Master Claude protected us.

That means she has to protect everyone here. No matter what's happened to Claude, this is her duty as his wife.

But if you're gone, how am I supposed to live?

A lovely, clear sound banishes that moment of fear.

“Gracious, Lady Aileen. Exactly what were you planning to do without the sacred sword?”

Lilia steps out in front of Aileen and sends the bloody woman and her holy sword flying. “Granted, that's precisely how a protagonist should behave, but you really should think a little before acting.”

“Lady...Lilia...”

“And you.” Promptly turning her back on Aileen, Lilia glances at the assailant. “I think you've gotten a bit carried away.”

“...What did you just do?”

“I raised those characters very, very carefully, and you call them ‘trash’? That's rather rude,” Lilia says brightly. She stands in front of the woman, barring her way, and slowly extends her right arm. Then she turns her palm toward the sky.

Sacred power emanates from it. The sight makes Aileen *tsk* in irritation. “So you really did have a sacred sword...!”

“Hmm. Let's see. What's the best line for a situation like this? ‘I'll hold her here! Leave me and run for it!’?”

“Lilia! What are you saying?” Cedric rises to his feet. Lilia glances at him briefly, but her eyes promptly return to the woman. She closes her fingers

around the hilt of the sword that floats just above her palm.

The bloody woman is entirely healed now, and she straightens up, frowning. “The sacred sword? But... Why do you still have that?”

“Oh, you’re switching personas? You mustn’t do that. You can be Grace from the game or your own original character, but please pick one and stick with it.”

“Whatever do you mean? I’m—”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Your Majesty, Queen Amelia Dark of Hausel.”

Staring down Lilia’s sword, the other woman falls silent.

The rest of the group looks shocked, but Lilia isn’t the least bit disturbed, and her smile never falters.

Amelia Dark...?

But the woman’s black hair and features are identical to Grace Dark’s, the villainess.

Aileen frowns. As if she’s read her mind, Lilia speaks without taking her eyes off the woman. “Lady Aileen. The thing is, I have no memories of my previous life.”

“What?”

“While I’m supposed to be the reincarnation of the Maid of the Sacred Sword, I didn’t inherit any of Amelia Dark’s memories. All that returned to me were memories of the game, like yours. Why do you suppose that is?”

Aileen gulps, looking at the woman again.

“Shouldn’t we assume it’s because Amelia Dark isn’t dead?”

“It can’t be... Then that’s—”

“She’s disguised herself to look just like Grace Dark. Or actually, considering the demon king’s reaction, maybe she’s puppeting her corpse.”

A body that moves without its head, that sheds no blood, that can imbue everything with holy power.

That really doesn’t seem possible for a living human.

“Then Amelia chose the Queen ending?”

“That’s right. I don’t know if she kept being reborn the way the game said, but however she did it, Amelia has lived for centuries. She’d seen a prophetic dream about Luciel’s resurrection, and she wanted to be present for it.”

“Wait, but the name of Ellmeyer’s Maid of the Sacred Sword is Amelia!”

“I don’t know how that happened. If anyone could rewrite history, it’d be the Queendom of Hausel.”

Just as Aileen is about to say it wouldn’t be that easy, she realizes something.

The standardization of languages. Based on a proposal from the Queendom, all languages and units of measurement were standardized, with each country’s language preserved as an “old tongue.” If that was where things were altered, little by little over centuries, it’s theoretically possible.

“But then... Why is the demon king’s true form angry? Why is she pretending to be Grace, of all people?”

“You can be dense about the strangest things, Lady Aileen... Isn’t that right, Serena?”

Serena has left the unconscious Sahra with Marcus and come to stand behind Auguste. She blinks in confusion. “What?”

“Question: Once upon a time, two sisters fought over a man. Then the older sister managed to win his heart! Although the two were deeply in love, they met an unhappy end. Still, they vowed to be together again in the future! The younger sister couldn’t bring herself to give up on the man. What did she do?”

“What do you mean, ‘what’? She’d ruin that vow no matter what it took.”

Even if it meant passing herself off as the sister she hated.

“I don’t know what actually happened. However, the queen of Hausel does have prophetic dreams, and she can see the past; that part matches the game. When she became queen and inherited those abilities, she probably found out that her true destiny had been to wed Luciel, the demon king.”

“Then—then what she’s after is—”

“She wants to bring about the correct future, the one where he marries her. She also wants to make sure he doesn’t meet her sister.”

That’s all.

She’s spent centuries just for that.

“I don’t know what you’re whispering about over there, but my name is Grace Dark.” The woman laughs. Her face is a hysterical, dreadful picture. “I had heard you’d lost your sacred sword to the Maid of the Cursed Sword, but— No matter. This world needs only one Maid of the Sacred Sword!”

The woman’s violet eyes grow wide, and this time, her right palm produces a sacred sword.

Aileen shouts at Lilia, “What are you going to do?! Can you defeat her?!”

“I dunno, tee-hee.”

“If you don’t know, then fighting her is the height of reckless—”

Lilia grabs Aileen by the scruff of the neck and tosses her toward the back before dropping into a low crouch. “But I have to do it. We don’t know how to beat her otherwise. Stay out of my way.”

“.....!”

The sacred swords clash, and Aileen bites her lip. Right now, she’d only hold Lilia back. She knows that.

However, Aileen lost with the sacred sword she’d taken from Lilia.

Even if Lilia is the real Maid of the Sacred Sword, how much will her sword be able to do? Just as Aileen thinks it, right before her eyes, Lilia’s sword begins to dissolve with a bubbling sound that makes her think of molten iron.

“Lady Lilia, she’ll only take your sword from you! Fall back!”

“Hmm. So it can’t win even if I’m the one using it. In other words, it didn’t lose because you were the one wielding it, Lady Aileen. We’ve also confirmed that Amelia is the Maid of the Sacred Sword— But actually, when the demon king blew himself up, the explosion wounded you quite badly, didn’t it?”

Lilia reinforces her vanishing sacred sword with holy power, spins once, and

shoves the woman away from her. The woman flies back into the forest, knocking down trees. Smiling, Lilia raises her sword high for another attack. “Besides, it looks like you’re not human anymore. Even this sword could kill you, don’t you think?”

Shining brightly, Lilia’s sacred sword grows so enormous that it seems to pierce the heavens, then swings down. The explosion and the blast wind mow down the forest.

Wondering if that’s actually done it, she looks down from the cliff top. Just then, a flash races past her, slicing through the wind. The thing that’s slipped past Lilia and skimmed over Aileen’s head is—a crystal. A divine item meant to capture someone.

“Prince Cedric?!”

Lilia turns back. Now missing half her body, the woman appears behind her, brandishing her sacred sword. Taking the full force of the attack, Lilia sinks to the ground.

“Lady Lilia!”

“What marvelous power. Just what I’d expect from the chosen one destined to be the Maid of the Sacred Sword.”

Repairing herself with sacred power, the woman rises into the air. She’s holding a small crystal between her fingertips. The one that’s engulfed Cedric.

“Without this, though, *you can’t become the Maid of the Sacred Sword*. Isn’t that right?”

“...I don’t know what you mean.”

“Don’t you? Let me show you.”

The woman squeezes the crystal. Light flares inside it, and it begins to crack. If the crystal breaks while Cedric’s trapped inside— Lilia turns pale, and her eyes widen. “You old hag!!”

“Stop it, Amelia. You’ve done enough,” says a quiet voice.

That voice is very familiar to Aileen. There’s such tenderness in it that if she closes her eyes, she can hear it calling her name. It belongs to—

“Master...Claude...”

He’s all right? Before she can run to him, something lands at her feet with a thud. It’s Luciel’s limp body. He was worried about Claude a moment ago and teleported to him. How did he end up like this?

As she looks up, intending to ask, she notices it.

Claude’s hair.

His glossy black hair has turned silvery white.

“He’s harmless; just leave him. My son was fond of him. Let him go.”

“...Master Claude?”

“I’d like my son’s body to be the only thing I take from him.”

Laying a hand on his chest, Claude closes his eyes sorrowfully.

The woman seems as stunned as Aileen and the others. “Luciel? Brother-in-law...?”

“No, don’t call me your brother. I’m your destined lover, Amelia.”

The woman gasps. So does Aileen.

“Truly...truly?”

“Yes, truly. I’ve acquired a human body and reawakened, and now my spell is complete. Its goal was to eliminate our mistaken destiny and bring about a proper future, and it’s finally succeeded.”

“Master Luciel... Oh, at last!”

Amelia’s voice is choked with emotion. She clings to him, and Claude gently embraces her.

Stunned, her mind nearly paralyzed, Aileen somehow manages to think. *To correct their mistaken destiny, and bring about... He can’t mean he’s overcome his grief over Grace and plans to wed Amelia, can he?!*

“N-nuh...no... No, that wasn’t my wish! It can’t have been!” Luciel himself rejects Aileen’s guess. “What did you do? Amelia, when I wished for one more chance, what did you do?!”

“...Hmm. So my remains are still alive?”

“No, you’ve got it wrong.” Luciel puts out a trembling hand, reaching for Claude. Hastily, Aileen supports him. “I’m Luciel, not you. You’re not me, Claude!”

“Says the coward who forced everything onto me.” Claude puts up an index finger and magic swells, forming a sphere.

Instinctively, Aileen shields Luciel, spreading her arms wide. “Stop this at once, Master Claude!”

Claude’s eyebrows twitch. He looks at her, and the sphere winks out of sight.

This startles Aileen. To think he’d stop when she told him to...

However, Claude sighs. “No matter,” he says brusquely. “That will keep. Let us return to Hausel, Amelia.”

“...Yes. Yes!”

The woman beams, nodding over and over. She releases the crystal that holds Cedric, dropping it as if it were rubbish. Marcus catches it.

“Master Claude!”

As Claude turns away, he glances at Aileen when she shouts.

His red eyes really do see her. It isn’t as if he doesn’t remember her, or doesn’t recognize her.

But Aileen can’t read any emotion in them.

Claude and the woman vanish, leaving behind nothing but a cloudless blue sky.



Every inch of the marble corridor is white and still.

Elefas has been straining his ears, scanning it with magic. Slowly, he opens his eyes. “It’s all right. There are no traps, and no soldiers have been stationed nearby.”

“Maybe they’ve all gone to the old castle? I hope the demons are okay...” Denis looks back.

“There’s no need to worry, Denis. The king is strong!” Beelzebuth says, reassuring him firmly.

Behind them, Jasper murmurs, “Right now, that’s a problem. He’s too strong.”

“I hope Lady Aileen is all right.”

“No need to worry on her account, either. You could kill that woman, and she wouldn’t die.”

Unsurprisingly, Rachel smiles instead of responding. The mind-numbing conversation makes Elefas shrug.

Then he sees a portrait, and his eyes narrow. The subject’s face has been slashed to ribbons, and the twisted malice he feels there pulls his mind into sharp focus. Slowly, he turns back. “That’s enough chatting. We are in the Queendom of Hausel. Fortunately, perhaps due to the battle, I can use my magic and Beelzebuth will be able to fight for us. While we have the chance—”

At that point, he subtly averts his eyes.

He mustn’t laugh. However, the more he thinks about it, the tenser his cheeks get.

“Let us split up, and um, search the Queendom of Hausel for useful information.”

“Okay, hon. Your auntie here will go catch up on all the gossip in the capital!”

“I’ll, like, totally do my best, too!”

Jasper winks; he’s wearing lipstick. Denis, who’s put on a big hair ribbon, strikes a muscle pose, and at that point he can’t take it anymore.

“P-please don’t...make me...laugh— Oh, don’t look at me and strike poses; this is really no time for jokes!”

“Why are you laughing? You were the one who said we should dress like women.” Beelzebuth folds his arms. His long hair is pulled back into a high ponytail with a ribbon that matches Denis’s, and he’s the best-looking woman

there.

The demon's beauty sobers Elefas up instantly. "It suits you very well."

"Doesn't it, though!" the demon boasts, for some unfathomable reason.

Jasper laughs. "I bet the cambion would look good in this getup, too. Sure we shouldn't have invited him?"

"In that case, invite the demon king! I'm sure he'd become the sort of beauty that topples nations. I'd love to see that."

"You're all going along with this too readily. I'd assumed you'd be a little more reluctant." Elefas smiles wryly.

Jasper gives a hearty laugh. "Sure, Young Master Isaac or Luc probably would have kicked up a fuss. If we let a little thing like cross-dressing scare us, though, we'd never be able to keep up with Miss Aileen."

"Um, Elefas? Your ribbon..."

When Rachel points out that the ribbon around the end of his braid is coming undone, Elefas fixes it himself.

Round-eyed, Denis watches him work. "Wow, you sure are good at that. You're quite a beauty yourself, Elefas!"

"Oh, yes, I'm used to this."

Rachel, who procured all their clothes and cosmetics, looks perplexed.

With the smile of a wicked adult, Elefas enlightens the girl. "In this world, there are people with all sorts of preferences."

"Preferences?"

"Oh— Rachel, this is the sort of stuff you shouldn't hear, so let's just not! Okay?!"

"Elefas! Everyone evacuated to the fort!" Almond says, poking his head out of the mirror on the dressing table. This is the mirror that's connected to the ceremonial site. Aileen used the power of the sacred sword to forcibly link the two spaces; however, since the mirror itself is a divine item, demons can also pass through it without trouble.

“And they didn’t get lost in the underground labyrinth?”

“Sugar has the map! I infiltrated!”

They’d attacked the fort in order to let everyone escape there from the old castle, which was about to become a battlefield.

It had been obvious that Isaac would abandon the fort if it were attacked, so they’d decided to concentrate the demons there. It would put them outside the demon king’s barrier, but during their assault on the fort, Elefas cast spells that would camouflage the building and keep people away, so they should be able to shelter there for a while.

Most importantly, they won’t be caught up in the fighting at the old castle.

If either James or Master Luciel manages to keep his sanity, it won’t be long before he realizes the demons are hiding.

Rachel turns to Almond. “Is Sir Keith all right?”

“They carried him to the fort! In treatment now! Must be quiet!”

“He’ll be fine. He’s the king’s right-hand man.”

The purehearted demons are mentally tougher than the humans.

“Um, are you sure it was all right for me to join you here?” Accepting a frying pan from Almond, who brought it as a weapon for some reason, Rachel gives him an uneasy look.

Elefas nods, smiling. “Yes. In fact, we’re counting on you. As a threat to Isaac — Well, let’s call it one more facet of our plan.”

“You just said ‘threat.’ Your uncle heard that.”

“You see, if I’ve read Isaac’s personality correctly, I believe he’ll try to leave the battle.”

That startles Rachel, and her eyes widen. He finds it rather charming.

“He seems earnest about that sort of thing. Unlike me, he isn’t the type who can keep betraying those close to him and be fine afterward.”

“...Yeah. Young Master Isaac really isn’t...”

“Besides, according to my estimate, the probability that Master Claude will be gone by the end of this is roughly seventy percent. Isaac won’t be able to face Lady Aileen.”

“Are you saying the king will lose?!”

“Demon King always wins!”

Beelzebuth and Almond speak up indignantly.

Jasper checks them. “Nah, listen, we can’t let him win this.”

“That’s right, calm down. I don’t know how he intends to do it, but Isaac is trying to stop Master Claude without killing him. Since there is no way to make Master Claude revert once he’s become a demon, all he can do is buy time. However, that can’t be what Lady Aileen wants.”

“Even so, Isaac has decided this is the best plan,” Rachel murmurs.

Elefas nods. “There’s no telling what Lady Aileen may do, and absolutely no way to know what Master Claude will do. Frankly, this may end even more badly than our worst-case predictions, but— At any rate, we desperately need information. The lack of it is the whole reason we’re a step behind.”

“So we infiltrate and investigate,” Almond says soberly.

The demon’s reaction threatens to give him a warm, fuzzy feeling, but he fights it and nods with extreme gravity. “This is merely my opinion as a mage, but the reason Master Claude has transformed—or rather, been forcibly transformed—must lie in the past. We know nothing about it, not even what it is. Rather surprisingly, I think the method Lady Aileen suggested may be our best course of action.”

“The...method?”

“Quelling the anger of the demon king’s true form.”

That is the source of everything.

“In the first place, something strange is afoot. The demon king bet on the future, at the cost of losing himself, and yet his wish hasn’t come true. That’s impossible.”

“Sorry, this old man isn’t following,” Jasper says.

Elefas simplifies his explanation. “With both magic and sacred power, what’s ultimately important is strength of will. If the demon king makes such an intense wish that he loses himself in the process, it’s basically a spell, or destiny. That means the destined lover the true form wished for must exist somewhere. If she does not, something’s very odd.”

“...Do you think somebody’s getting in the way?”

“It seems very likely. I would imagine the Queendom of Hausel is involved. That royal candidate is definitely someone to watch.”

“Yeah, probably so. Still, quelling the demon king’s true form’s anger means fulfilling that wish about his destined lover, right? Wouldn’t that be a bad idea?”

“That would mean that Master Claude would wed a woman who is not Lady Aileen...”

Rachel’s unease is quite reasonable, but Elefas speaks firmly. “Even so, if we don’t resolve it from that angle, we’ll never get anywhere. In addition, anything we do about this destined lover will involve Master Luciel’s wife by default. We need at least a little information.”

“Master’s wife?” Almond says from his perch on top of Beelzebuth’s head.

“What, you mean Lady Grace?”

At Beelzebuth’s words, an odd silence falls.

Don’t tell me... Elefas’s eyes turn toward Beelzebuth. The demon’s expression is grave. “Aileen is bad, but Lady Grace was even worse.”

“Lady Grace is scary. Nom-nom. She’ll eat us all up.”

“...Wait a moment. Erm... You knew her, then?”

Both Beelzebuth and Almond cock their heads, looking puzzled.

“Of course. She was the previous king’s wife.”

“Demon King’s wife!”

“T-tell me that sooner!”

Elefas closes in aggressively. Beelzebuth pulls back, startled. “B-but you didn’t ask.”

“Surely you could tell what we needed!! No, never mind that, what was she like?!”

“Wh-what do you mean? She had black hair, like the king’s—”

“Really straight! Shiny! Pretty!”

“She was the strongest of all the beings I’ve ever met. She beat Master Luciel.”

“What...?” The preposterous statement cools his excitement instantly.

Beelzebuth looks embarrassed. As he continues, he mumbles, eyes fixed on the floor. “She did it with one punch—a right straight. Then she kicked him so hard he flew, and then she stepped on him.”

“Master apologized... We all said sorry! We had to, or we were roast chicken!”

“...Didn’t Master Luciel begin as a god?”

“I-it wasn’t that he was weak. That woman—I mean, Lady Grace—was just abnormal!”

The fact that Beelzebuth corrected himself to say her name with respect is frightening all by itself.

Almond darts a glance at Beelzebuth. “...Could Demon King win?”

“Y-yes. The king might be able to win, probably, I think...”

“Nah, there’s no way. From what I’m hearing, his wife was stronger than Miss Aileen,” Jasper says.

Beelzebuth and Almond opt to stay quiet.

Rachel looks grave. “And if we find this woman, she and Lady Aileen will duel?”

“—Let’s not think about that! For now, what we need is information.”

“Hey, you’re just putting it off.” Denis’s remark hits him where it hurts, but Elefas has no plans to change his policy.

“If it comes down to it, we’ll simply tell her a clever story of some sort and make her our ally.”

“Deceive her? Meaning Lady Grace? You fool! Do you have a death wish?!”

“She’ll kill you, Elefas! Dead in one blink!”

“Yes, that’s right. My life has been one long, potentially fatal walk across thin ice! And you will join me this time!”

Ignoring their dismayed cries, Elefas opens the door to the next room, revealing a corridor of tall, slender columns and a high ceiling supported by pointed arches. Sunlight streams in through the large windows. The passage is so majestic, it seems as if it could lead to heaven.

Immediately, Denis’s eyes light up. “Wow, Hauselian architecture! Oooh, the geometric patterns in those windows really are made of stone... Incredible! I wonder who built them!”

“I’m sorry, but that will have to wait. We need to move while no one’s here.”

“Where are we going, though?”

“There was a place I couldn’t probe, even with magic. All of the palace’s security has been shut down, and yet that place is still hidden. Whatever is there must be very important, so first we’ll go—”

“From the way this place is built, I bet the throne’s back here! Let’s go, hurry!”

“No, listen, don’t forget why we’re—”

Denis has thrown open a door, and beyond it, magic crackles. On reflex, Elefas casts a magic barrier to hide them. He has no idea whether it will fool anyone, but it’s the best he can do.

“Quiet,” he says, and everyone nods. The whole group hides in the shadows behind a big pillar, watching to see what will happen.

In front of the throne, space twists and warps. It’s a sign that someone is teleporting in. It isn’t going smoothly because that someone is attempting to use magic to force their way into a field of strong sacred power. In other words, the newcomer is no ordinary person.

“...Good grief. We still have a few headaches to deal with.”

“! Sire—”

Denis claps a hand over Beelzebuth’s mouth. Rachel hugs Almond to herself; he cocks his head, but stays quiet. That’s the correct response.

The new arrival is definitely Claude, but his appearance has changed drastically. His black hair is now the palest silver.

Changing the color of one’s hair and eyes runs counter to the laws of this world. Even the demon king couldn’t do it easily. An abnormal situation is unfolding.

Besides, that woman...

The black-haired woman in the bridal gown— The red stains on the gown’s white fabric are the blood of his superior.

If Claude is with a woman who’s wearing a thing like that, then something is very wrong.

“Headaches? What are you referring to?”

“Well. First, there’s my other self. We can’t call this a complete resurrection until we’ve cleared that away.” As Claude speaks, he seats himself on the Queendom of Hausel’s throne as if he belongs there.

“Then why did you let him go earlier?”

“I’m hardly in prime condition yet. I’m not accustomed to my son’s body.”

The phrase “my son’s body” makes Elefas sigh to himself. *So he’s been completely taken over, hmm?*

Jasper whispers in his ear, “Hey. At worst, we were only gonna seal the demon king, right? What’s going on?”

“I imagine things grew more complicated. In all probability, it was either Master Claude’s fault or Lady Aileen’s.”

“Are you implying that the king was to blame?”

“Be quiet, all of you. I can’t hear them,” Rachel admonishes, and they all fall silent.

“Very well. I’ll do something about him.”

“Can you? He’s still my other half, and he has enough power left to qualify as the demon king. You’ve used up almost all those failed holy swords. I doubt you could do away with him easily.”

“I have the sacred sword.”

“That won’t be much help. The holy power channeled through that sacred sword protects him.”

“But that’s... You can’t mean...”

“Yes. The protection of the woman who tore our destinies apart.”

Elefas sees hatred flare in the woman’s doll-like eyes.

“So she’s been lending him power through the sacred sword.”

“That must have been why the oath didn’t work very well. At first, neither my son nor I understood that Amelia Dark was our destined lover.”

Coldly, the woman turns those hate-filled eyes on Claude. It’s almost as if she doubts him.

“...I understand. However, rest assured that the holy swords and sacred sword are not the only weapons I have. This palace is a concentration of the technology and wisdom of the Queendom of Hausel, created in order to defeat the demon king if he were resurrected.”

“Oh-ho? And what are you planning to do with that?”

“Defeat the demon king, of course. Imperial Ellmeyer is harboring the demon king. That alone should be enough to bring the world to our side.”

“The demon king, hmm? And you’re sure I’m not a problem?” He sounds as if he’s teasing her.

The woman responds dispassionately, “You will be a god someday.”

“I see. I’ll leave that to you and rest, then. I’m not used to this body, and the fatigue is brutal.”

“Very well. I will have a bedchamber prepared for you.”

“Come join me, wearing your true form.” Claude holds out a hand.

The woman looks startled, then lowers her eyes. “...I still have duties to attend to.”

“You can’t show your true self to me? That body was only insurance, in case the oath didn’t work, wasn’t it?”

“.....”

“Well, no matter. I won’t allow you to disrespect me by making me embrace a corpse, though.” Laughing, Claude winks out of sight.

The woman gives the empty throne a long, steady look. Then she vanishes as well.

It’s incredibly fortunate they both prefer teleporting everywhere.

Elefas exhales, and the others’ shoulders slump. Jasper sits down with a thump, right on the spot, and gazes up at the ceiling. “Man oh man. The demon king was the demon king all over; that was scary. What was that business about his son’s body?”

“Master Claude must have been taken over entirely. That explains his new hair color...” He covers his mouth with a hand, thinking.

Just then, the floor begins to shake. “Whoa!” Denis grabs Beelzebuth for support. “What is it? Not the demon king, right?”

“No, this is— Curses, it’s sacred power! Let’s get away from here!”

The throne is a magnetic field of holy power. If they stay near it, they won’t be able to use magic.

Elefas breaks into a run, hastily trying to get as far away from the center of the field as possible. The others follow, with Beelzebuth and Almond flying at the head of the group.

“If anything blocks our path, I assume it’s all right to defeat it?”

“Please do. —Actually, wait, both you and Almond are still sane?!”

“? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I feel great!”

Perhaps because a “demon king” still exists, they haven’t lost their minds. He can’t let that reassure him, though. The barrier that’s threatening to swallow their group is made of sacred power. If it engulfs them, he won’t be able to use magic, and there’s no telling what may happen to a weaker demon like Almond.

However, when they burst out into the gallery, he realizes there’s nowhere to run.

Elefas has stopped in his tracks, and Jasper runs into him. He starts to complain, then shuts up. Rachel turns pale. Denis cheers, and Beelzebuth and Almond sound impressed.

“The palace is floating! That’s incredible!”

The Queendom of Hausel is an oval island extolled as paradise, and the palace is rising from the center of that beautiful, heavenly isle, floating into the air. The stone-flagged corridors crumble away with a prolonged crash, and before long, all that’s visible on the other side of the gallery are sky and sea.

A moment later, he feels the barrier’s thin membrane engulf him from behind. Beelzebuth shudders, falling to his knees, and Almond drops weakly out of the air. His numb fingertips tell Elefas he can’t use magic.

“Almond, are you all right?! And you, Beelzebuth?”

“Y-yes... I’m fine, woman. Being unable to use magic is nothing...”

“I...weak...now... Cookies...”

Rachel has scooped Almond up in her arms, and he slyly cadges a cookie from her. This is no time for a leisurely snack, though.

The palace is still rising. Sacred power has enveloped the entire building. Jumping off now, while they have no magic, would mean certain death.

“Uh... Listen, ain’t this real bad news?” As if to justify Jasper’s unease, a shrill sound echoes. The magic used to cast the barrier that hid them has been detected.

In the depths of the corridor, he sees the now-familiar figures of the all-white soldiers squeezing out from the gaps between the stone flags.

Jasper, who’s never seen them before, yells, “What are those things?!”

“Certainly not our allies! We need to run.”

“Run?! I’ll stand and fight!”

“Please don’t be a fool, Beelzebuth! You’re capable of no more than the average human at the moment! While we’re on the subject, I’m currently among the weakest of average humans!”

“Your uncle Jasper thinks you probably shouldn’t brag about stuff like that.”

“B-but run where?!” Rachel asks.

All eyes turn to Elefas. He looks away uncomfortably. “Since I can’t use magic, I don’t know the specifics of the building’s layout any—”

“And all of a sudden you’re completely useless. Work a little harder, youngster!”

“A-at any rate, let’s run. See, here they come!”

Neat ranks of soldiers level their spears at them. The one bright spot is that the gallery is rather narrow, so they aren’t able to move fast. If they catch up to them, though, it’s still going to be very bad.

Holding on to his cap and running for dear life, Jasper shouts, “S-so anyway, head somewhere safe, right? Uh, let’s see— The kitchen!”

“Th-the kitchen?”

“In this country, they use demon stones and sacred stones for everything from lighting fires to fetching water! Doesn’t that mean the barrier will avoid the kitchen?! Not being able to cook when they put up a barrier would be real inconvenient!”

“In this architectural style, they usually put the kitchen in a separate building. I think you’re on to something. Um, in terms of the floor plan, it should be this way!”

Elefas looks at Jasper and Denis, without objecting. He doesn’t show it, but he’s surprised. These humans can’t use magic or fight, but they’re navigating this situation by their wits alone.

Most humans don’t possess any magic or sacred power. For the commonfolk,

their strength is their intelligence and ingenuity. That is what gives birth to new tools and new skills, which can be passed on to the next generation as knowledge.

...Oh. So that's why the demons respect these people.

Even if Elefas can't use magic, he still has the skills and knowledge he learned in the pursuit of magic. If that false Claude claims to be a god, those really will be their only way to fight him.

Steeling himself, Elefas shouts, "We'll head there first, then! If you see any sacred stones, divine items, or any other tools that seem useful, bring them along. We may be able to use them to contact someone."

"Huh? We can do that?"

"I can only use magic, but in theory, sacred power should work the same way. We'll make them useful through sheer willpower! If we find any sacred stones or half-made holy swords, Denis should be able to fashion us some weapons. Then you'll be able to fight, Beelzebuth!"

"I see! You're smart. I'd expect no less from the king's vaunted mage!"

Beelzebuth's compliment makes Elefas's eyes widen. Then he laughs, returning his nod. "Of course."



In the Kingdom of Ashmael, a nation of hot sands, evenings are always crimson. The ruddy color gradually cools to deep indigo as night falls.

As the setting sun grows redder, Roxane gazes at it from the Sun Palace.

If we do not return from the Queendom of Hausel by nightfall— Her husband has left her instructions on what to do. However, she can't imagine that simply having instructions means that everything will be all right.

The Kingdom of Ashmael currently has no holy sword, no Daughter of God, and no holy general. They do have a water dragon—now the Holy Dragon Consort—but her powers won't work unless the sacred barrier vanishes. If the

barrier vanishes, it will mean they've lost Baal.

If they are going to keep the world from swallowing their kingdom, that man is absolutely vital.

She squeezes her hands into fists in her lap. Just then, there's a noise behind her. Turning, she sees a shadow that wasn't there before.

"Roxane."

"Master Baal!"

She leaps from her chair, knocking it over, and flies into his arms. The feel of the hot pulse in his chest is a tremendous relief, but then she smells blood, and her eyes open. Over his side, his clothes have been slashed.

"Master Baal, you're wounded?"

He puts his arms around her, clinging to her, and the words stick in her throat.

"We couldn't save him."

Baal's arms tighten. This isn't like him. He's holding her so close, it's as if he doesn't want her to see his face. "He told us to see it through to the end, but there's nothing more we can do. —What holy king fails to grant his friend's wish? It's absurd."

"Master Baal..."

"We may take your friend from you as well... The Queendom of Hausel has declared war on Ellmeyer."

If Baal tries to aid the demon king now, it will put Ashmael in opposition to the Queendom. That means he can't help either Claude or Aileen.

"We're sor—"

"You must not apologize. You are the king." She holds him close, filling the gesture with affection and respect. She wants to give this man, whose crown isolates him, even a little measure of peace. To help him move forward with conviction. "Any choice you make will be sufficient. You are the king, and so you are correct."

"...What's that supposed to mean? Are we a despot?"

“Besides, Prince Claude hasn’t actually died, has he?”

If he had, the Holy Dragon Consort certainly wouldn’t be behaving herself. The tension drains from Baal’s arms, and she steps away from him slightly. At last, he lets her see his face.

What a troublesome king. Being unable to help his friend is such a small thing, but Baal looks as if he might burst into tears.

“In that case, it’s all right. Lady Aileen could never lose.” She strokes his cheek, her fingertips gently brushing away the hair that hangs over his eyes.

Baal manages to squeeze out a question. “How can you be so sure?”

“If I were in her situation, I would save my husband no matter what it took. That is simply how it is.”

And Baal is definitely among the things Aileen is willing to use.

Treating the king of another country this way is hardly acceptable behavior, particularly when that king happens to be Roxane’s husband. Someday, no doubt, she’ll need to lodge a formal complaint about it. If this is something her husband wants, though, that’s a different matter.

“And so it’s all right, Master Baal. Don’t look like that, please. I am truly glad you’ve returned home safely.”

“...Roxane.”

“Welcome back. Come, let’s tend to your wound.”

When she strokes the spot she suspects has been injured, Baal pulls her into another tight embrace.

“I’m home,” he says, his voice husky. Instead of responding, she simply puts her arms around him. At least for tonight, she wants to be kinder than usual, to spoil him thoroughly.

She doesn’t want to yield that duty to anyone, not even the Holy Dragon Consort.

Roxane knows the name of this feeling.

Once the realization sinks in, she can’t understand how she didn’t see it

earlier, and her lips curve.

However, Baal is filled with the sorrow of losing a friend and the powerlessness of being unable to help him precisely because he is king. Roxane is sure her love won't strike a chord in him now. She mustn't rush things. Doing so was why she'd failed the first time.

Most of all, the realization makes anger well up from the pit of her stomach. Her eyes slowly narrow. *How dare you do this to my Master Baal, Queendom of Hausel?*

Her gaze comes to rest on the diary on the desk.

She'd heard that the book would open when its owner's dream came true. Out of the indigo sky, a wind blows, fluttering its pages.

◆ Seventh Act ◆

The Villainess Goes Conveniently Missing

Even when she wakes up, the space next to her is empty.

Cautiously, Aileen reaches out to touch the sheets. They're cold.

Feeling the warmth of her husband's body had been a perfectly natural thing only a few days ago, according to her perception of time, but now it's gone.

"Hello, sweet Ailey. Morning!"

She's pulled the down comforter over her head, but someone yanks it away.

She didn't sense anyone coming in, and she's so startled that she bolts up in bed. The coverlet thief is energetically opening the curtains in the royal couple's bedchamber, one after another.

"Walt... Don't scare me first thing in the morning."

"Whoa! That disheveled, just-woke-up look is very nice, Ailey. You look like somebody's wife!"

"Listen, you." Already feeling tired, Aileen slips her legs out of bed.

Walt sits down beside her, offering her a cup of tea with an affected gesture. "There. Your morning beverage."

"My, how considerate."

"Yes, well. During my time as a Nameless Priest, I did all sorts of things. Apprentice butler, boy entrepreneur, stage magician, the kind young florist!"

"That's quite well rounded. A career in acting might suit you."

"My best role was that of the lover who leads the beautiful wife astray."

As Aileen raises the cup to her lips, Walt peers up into her face, a suggestive smile in his eyes. An index finger that has likely comforted tired wives stops just before it touches her chin.

"What on earth are you doing, Walt?!"

“Oh, Kyle. Good morning.”

“Ow! Kyle! It’s not time for your shift yet! Why are you here?!”

“How long did you think I’d leave you and Lady Aileen alone together? I’m twenty minutes early!”

Kyle has twisted Walt’s arm up behind his back, and Walt is yelping that it hurts. In front of them, Aileen elegantly crosses her legs and drinks her tea.

It’s a bright morning, and the previous day’s battle and declaration of war seem unreal.

No doubt they’re intentionally behaving this way to help her think along those lines. They’re good guards.

“You genuinely have no principles! What are you even talking about?! A time like this, and you still— That’s just indecent.”

“Times like these are the ones where we need a little humor. You’re such a stick-in-the-mud.”

“You’re too loose! Everything you do is the sort of thing Master Claude would find funny and imitate!”

“Master Claude’s very being is indecent and immoral, right? This stuff’s his specialty.”

One of Aileen’s eyebrows twitches— But no, he said that on purpose, to defuse the tension. Probably.

“And when Master Claude imitates that and shoves all the cleanup onto us? What then?!”

“We’ll teach him that ending an affair neatly is part of a lover’s job!”

“Master Claude is a very quick study, remember?!”

“How exactly do you two play with Master Claude?”

The sound of Aileen’s low voice makes Kyle flinch guiltily. In contrast, Walt gives her a bright smile. “It’s fine. There’s nothing we could teach that face— I said that hurts, Kyle! Don’t hit me!”

“Lady Aileen. You don’t need to worry. In the end, everything about Master

Claude comes back to focus on you.”

“Yes, I bet he’d want to play ‘Lovers’ with sweet Ailey.”

“I imagine he wouldn’t want to yield the role of husband, either, so he and Elefas will come up with a way to split him in two.”

“Make sure you stop him before that idea gets all the way to me. —Why won’t you look at me?”

Without responding, Kyle bows respectfully and pours her more tea.

“Well? Has the situation changed at all since I retired yesterday?”

“No changes, unfortunately.”

“...I’m very sorry.”

In that case, Rachel—the one who would ordinarily have come to wake Aileen—is still missing, while Keith is unconscious and in critical condition.

They aren’t the only ones who are missing or wounded.

First, although Isaac was rescued from the rubble, he broke his arm and took a nasty blow to the head. Luc mentioned that he’s still unconscious and in no condition to have visitors. Cedric was extracted from the crystal; his life is in no danger, but he’s battered and covered in cuts, and he’s currently being treated by the imperial family’s physician.

Sahra didn’t suffer any physical wounds, but perhaps from the shock of having her body ransacked, she’s still unconscious. Ares is awake, but as Walt initially guessed, his left leg is useless. On top of that, he was wounded so badly in his battle with Claude that it’s all he can do to sit up in bed.

Many are missing as well. Elefas, Beelzebuth, Almond, Denis, and even Jasper have vanished, like Rachel. None of them has sent word. It isn’t even clear whether they got caught up in the fighting or not.

Although Aileen’s people have taken heavy damage, Lilia, Marcus, and Lester have escaped with only superficial injuries. She’d really like to register a complaint.

The one bright spot is that we managed to send Master Baal safely home to

Ashmael.

It wouldn't be wise to drag him in any deeper. She's just grateful he's let them keep Ares and Sahra. Even though the Daughter of God and the holy general could become a weakness for Ashmael, he said they would be a good source of information and left them here.

Here, in a land that the Queendom of Hausel has sworn to attack unless they hand over the demon king.

"...Has the rumor that the Queendom has taken to the sky been confirmed?"

"We had Sugar and the others to go take a look. They came back delighted about the 'floating palace.' James confirmed it with the sea demons as well. They say it's moving."

So now the Queendom of Hausel is a flying palace. Apparently the royal palace has physically risen into the sky.

When she initially heard this, even Aileen had said, "Gracious, that can't be right. This isn't a game." Perhaps as a result, in spite of herself, she's begun to think in terms of the game. "In the end, I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that the Game 2 combat specialists are all unharmed..."

"Hmm? Did you say something?"

"I said that you, who remained safe, are outstanding guards. Thank you for being here, even when Master Claude is not."

Exchanging looks, Walt and Kyle shrug.

"Sweet Ailey, if we left you and ran off somewhere, there's no telling what he'd do to us."

"The fact that Master Claude can be unreasonable is nothing new. You don't have to trouble yourself over it, Ailey."

"I'm counting on you both. Auguste and James are still here, too... Now there's an idea. Once again, we may as well—"

""But I refuse to participate in the duck squad.""

Without so much as a glance at each other, the two speak in unison,

determined not to yield on that point.

Aileen bursts out laughing. Then she rises from the bed. The weather is fine. Apparently the demon king is in a good mood, over in the Queendom of Hausel.

“I’m going to take him back.”

Walt and Kyle kneel, facing each other, each with a hand over his heart. Aileen walks between them, toward where her maids wait with her dress and cosmetics.

As a rule, the crown princess cannot serve as a substitute for the crown prince. However, Cedric is next in the line of succession, and even he is injured and unable to move.

No one else is qualified, and under the circumstances, no one is particularly eager to take on the responsibility. As a result, the court has settled on a vague compromise: Aileen and Cedric—the crown prince’s wife and younger brother—will lead together. Practically speaking, this leaves Aileen responsible for Imperial Ellmeyer. After all, no matter what they do, time is of the essence.

If you have not handed over the demon king in seven days’ time, we will launch a full-scale offensive against your nation.

The Queendom of Hausel, which looks down over the world from the sky, issued that declaration of war yesterday.

They have only six days left.

“Auguste is guarding Serena, Lady Sahra, and Master Ares. Has he passed along any further information?” As she makes her way down a corridor, heels clicking on the marble floor, Aileen asks Walt and Kyle for a new report.

“Not yet. Lady Sahra and Master Ares are in no shape to talk. Serena’s the only one he can talk to, and he says she doesn’t have any real information.”

“Can we trust that? I dunno what their actual connection is, but—”

“It’s all right. Serena has begun to try for the position of wife of the Holy Knights’ captain in earnest. Auguste won’t be able to succeed in the Holy Knights unless Master Claude becomes emperor. If Serena is trying to save Lady Sahra and Master Ares, at the very least, they are not our enemies.”

The only response from Walt and Kyle is awkward silence. They seem unhappy with this. She doesn't know whether they're worried for Auguste or feel that their friend has stolen a march on them. Either way, it's charming. Smiling wryly, Aileen adds another remark for good measure: "James said it was all right as well. In that case, it's fine."

"Well, yes, but... This would be easier if Isaac would hurry and wake up."

"Speaking of that, Lady Aileen. Luc has reported that Isaac had a key in his pocket. It seems to be the key to a safe, but there should be two; one is missing, and the safe can't be opened. Isaac may have hidden it, or he may have given it to someone else."

"I see... And we still know nothing about what's happened to Rachel, Elefas, Denis, and the rest?"

"Right. Elefas set up the attack on the fort, then told Ribbon, 'Keep an eye on Isaac, but don't let him notice. If he's in danger, save him.' After that, no one knows where he went."

"We're asking around in town, but due to the situation, everything's terribly confused."

"Morning, Aileen."

Rudolph is waiting in an anteroom just outside the imperial palace's conference room.

Feeling a little nervous, Aileen responds, "Good morning, Father."

"We've received a response from the Queendom of Hausel. Sacred stones are handy things, aren't they? They say, 'By *demon king*, we mean the one known as Luciel.'"

Aileen sighs. She was expecting that. "Are they insinuating that Master Claude, whom they have kidnapped, is not the demon king?"

"Perhaps he stopped being the demon king as soon as he sided with the Holy Queendom? Well, there's no point in splitting hairs with them. What will you do? I've heard no one knows where your father-in-law is."

At some point, Luciel disappeared. He'd been injured, but no doubt he'd used

his magic to heal himself, so that doesn't worry her. However, when she asked the demons where he'd gone, they wouldn't say. Apparently he's issued a gag order.

Only James has testified, reluctantly, that he hasn't returned to the demon realm.

"We'll have to find him before the Queendom's deadline, or else."

"Gracious, Father. Do you intend to hand Master Luciel over to them?"

"Well, we have no choice, do we? That's what the council will determine."

If her father says so, it's as good as done. No doubt the council will decide to hand over Luciel, and they'll issue orders to find him as quickly as possible.

"What did the Queendom say regarding our request for an extension, to facilitate our search?"

"They ignored it. They probably set that deadline because they planned to attack in seven days' time regardless. That means we have six days left. Is that clear?"

Rudolph is telling her that he'll buy her six days, and no more. By informing Aileen in advance, he's hinting at several things she must do.

"Kyle, I'll attend the conference with Walt. Return to the old castle immediately and tell the demons that they are not to go outside the barrier under any circumstances. People are bound to try to force them to reveal Master Luciel's location."

With a small nod, Kyle turns on his heel.

The barrier Claude cast over the forest to protect the demons is still there, possibly because Luciel has taken it over. If their opponents are human, the safest place for them will be inside the barrier.

In that sense, it may be fortunate that Claude isn't here. If Aileen is told to bring the demons to them, she can simply refuse on the grounds that she isn't the demon king, and so she isn't able to.

"It's all we can do to persuade other nations not to get involved. The idea that we may be harboring the demon king puts us at a disadvantage. Not only that,

but your father-in-law, Luciel, isn't Ellmeyer's next emperor."

"I'm aware of that."

"And you don't intend to hand him over. Correct?"

"Retaking Master Claude comes first."

Rudolph gazes at Aileen steadily before he speaks again. "...Reports of damage to the capital are coming in. There are many wounded, and quite a few of the nobles are already preparing to flee abroad. I'd imagine there will be several empty chairs at this conference. Even so, as the crown princess, that's your decision?"

"It is. I deeply regret the trouble I'm causing you, Father—"

"That said, there hasn't been a single death. The districts from the third layer out are unscathed. Even the first and second layers were mostly subjected to blast winds. The only structure that's falling apart is the old castle. Even after hearing the declaration of war, almost no one from the third layer and below is trying to run."

She looks up. There's a faint smile on Rudolph's lips.

"No matter who becomes emperor, it won't change much. You have managed to find yourself a good man."

"...Father."

"Why are you apologizing, Your Highness? Just laugh and say this is the perfect opportunity to drain the empire of its pus. My sons are sure to be useful in the reforms that follow. Just as before, even if they are human."

He's speaking as her retainer. She swallows audibly, then nods. "Very well. I will inform Master Claude."

"Thank you very much. Duke d'Autriche and his household eagerly await the day when the empress's diadem shines on your brow."

Bowing quietly, Rudolph smiles at her, then reverts to his usual tone. "All right, I'll go do some covert negotiating. I need to squash proposals to bring back His Majesty, Emperor Pierre and restore the title of crown prince to Prince Cedric." Checking his pocket watch, he leaves the room.

She doesn't realize she'd stiffened up until the tension drains out of her. *That's the first time Father has ever treated me as the crown princess.*

That alone makes her stand straighter.

There's a knock, and a voice addresses her, "Your Highness, I would like to speak with you before the conference."

When Walt opens the door, Lester is standing there.

"I happened to overhear that we don't intend to hand over the demon king Luciel."

"That's correct. However, I believe the conference will decide that we must do so."

"In other words, we're buying time... Well, that's all we can do. It's a wise decision. After they get the demon king, I suppose they'll demand Lilia. After all, the woman said the world needed only one Maid of the Sacred Sword."

Lester strides in brazenly. She's rather impressed by his analysis. *This world needs only one Maid of the Sacred Sword*— If they take the woman's words at face value, then of course Lilia is a target, too.

"Was that all you needed?"

"Here." Fishing through an inside pocket, Lester holds something out to Aileen. It's a key.

It's probably the twin to the key Isaac had.

"Isaac Lombard gave this to me. I'm told it's the key to a safe. He said it would take one other key to open it; he should have that. The safe holds proof that he collaborated with the Queendom of Hausel, and of a scandal my family was involved in... The man's nothing if not well prepared."

"Why are you giving this to me?"

He can't think they haven't retrieved Isaac's key, can he? Lester adjusts his glasses, and the lens glare hides his eyes. "His goal was to seal the demon king. Since we don't know how to restore Prince Claude, it was very likely that he would remain in that state for the rest of his life. That would be tantamount to killing the crown prince, and Isaac knew you would never agree to it, but he still

made that plan.”

“I don’t feel that he betrayed us. If you’re trying to threaten him, your attempt is misguided.”

“However, if I keep this, someday you’ll be forced to cut him off. On the other hand, if you have his key, then you’ll have power over me. If you have both, we won’t be able to defy you.”

Aileen looks up. Lester places the key on her palm, then closes her fingers around it.

“And so you should have both. No doubt you still need him. Myself as well.”

“.....”

“I hear he hasn’t awakened yet, but— I’ll leave it to you to talk him around.”

Now that Aileen really thought about it, Lester Craine had been one of the most intelligent characters in Game 1.

Isaac is sharper, of course, but still.

“...I’m genuinely grateful. Thank you.”

“Don’t misunderstand. I simply don’t like this attempt of his to shoulder all the blame and disappear. In the first place, if he thought he’d backed me into a corner with something like this, he’s insulted me terribly.”

“I see. Even so, until this matter is concluded, let us call a truce. I’ll make it possible for us to exchange information.”

Lester shrugs, then sits down in the chair in front of Aileen without asking permission. “I’m glad this went so smoothly. Getting right down to business, then: Would you promote Marcus, even temporarily? If he’s guarding the West Tower, I can’t mobilize him without mobilizing all the knights.”

“What if I make him Prince Cedric’s personal bodyguard?”

“That will do. If you’ll give me your signature, Your Highness, I’ll make the arrangements myself.”

“I don’t trust you that much, nor will I underestimate you. Walt, call James—”

“Aileen, do you have a minute?”

With impeccable timing, James has stopped by. At the sight of Lester, he scowls and falls silent. Guessing what he'd like to say, Aileen heads him off. "He's our ally now. You may speak. Has something happened?"

"An ally... You haven't made a lackey of him, have you?"

"Who are you calling a lackey?! You are speaking to the heir to Marquis Craine! I am the scion of an ancient and honorable family!" Lester rises to his feet indignantly.

James's eyes are as cold as glass beads. "Whereas I am the next lord of the Duchy of Mirchetta, and the lady before you is Her Highness, the Crown Princess of Ellmeyer."

"Easy, easy. It's fine, James. If there's a problem, Master Claude will deal with it later," Walt says brightly.

James nods. "True. Disposing of things without a trace is his forte."

"Wait, what do you mean by that? Don't tell me the demon king devours people headfirst?!"

"I'm told the water dragon is headed here from the Kingdom of Ashmael. The demons are making a fuss about it."

"The water dragon? You can't mean— The Holy Dragon Consort?" Aileen's eyes widen.

James nods again.

Lester's question has been ignored, but apparently he's decided it isn't that important. He frowns. "Does Ashmael intend to give us more aid? The holy king can justify his participation in yesterday's battle as legitimate self-defense, but any more would be..."

"I doubt the kingdom has anything to do with this. If it did, the holy king would have contacted us about it through the sacred stone."

"Then this was the Holy Dragon Consort's personal decision? I wonder what's happened."

"She should reach the old castle soon. The conference is about to begin; what would you like to do? No one will recognize the water dragon as the Holy

Dragon Consort on sight, but if anyone sees her, things may get tiresome.”

“You should go to greet her, Your Highness. Demon or not, she is another nation’s royal consort.” Lester is the first to advise her. “The conference is a mere formality; its conclusion has already been decided. The young lord there should go as well. I’ll attend the conference as Marquis Craine’s proxy. Our time is limited.”

“—I am in your debt.”

“I’ll pray she bears good news. Oh, and your signature...?”

“Ask Prime Minister d’Autriche in my place.”

Duke d’Autriche and Marquis Craine are political rivals. If Lester happens to be up to something dishonest, Rudolph won’t let it slip past him. As a matter of fact, he’ll probably weaponize it.

Lester frowns, but grunts in agreement. Apparently he’s both mature and flexible enough to choose benefit over appearance. Satisfied, Aileen rises to leave the antechamber.

Auguste is pushing a serving cart when Quartz enters the old castle through its front door. Their eyes meet, and Auguste blinks. The other man is carrying a basket. It’s probably medicine.

“Quartz, are you on your way to make the rounds?”

Quartz nods wordlessly. Auguste has spoken with the taciturn, slightly older youth no more than a dozen times. He doesn’t even remember what his voice sounds like, but he doesn’t think of him as a difficult person to get along with. He’s a good guy who listens when others are talking and responds properly.

“Would you come with me, then? I was just about to take them breakfast.”

“...Did you make it?”

“Oh, yes. It’s just vegetables, meat, and cheese between slices of bread, though.”

“...Thoughtful. Good for you.”

The compliment makes him feel a little bashful and happy. “When I was at the

group home, I was constantly fixing meals for a crowd, so I'm used to it. The basic ingredients are quality stuff, so it should taste pretty good."

"...That helps a lot. Luc hasn't eaten anything."

"Maybe I should have made something a little easier to digest, then... Keith hasn't woken up yet, has he? Isaac either."

Those are the two Luc has been attending constantly.

Quartz nods again. "...The adviser isn't out of danger yet."

"I see... Just having Keith here would be incredibly reassuring."

"What about...the others? The general and the Daughter of God."

"Um..." Turning evasive, Auguste begins pushing the cart again. Quartz follows silently. "The Daughter of God is still unconscious. Even though she isn't hurt."

"...It was probably the shock. If she doesn't wake up, though, she'll eventually weaken and die."

"Serena's sharing strength with her, so they say she should be all right for a while. The general can't move, but he's awake and lucid. He's worried about the Daughter of God..."

"...What's the matter?"

"Um. Could you pretend you didn't hear this?" Fortunately, the hall is hushed, and no one's around. Quartz blinks once, then nods.

Auguste brings his fist down on an empty spot on the serving cart. "Why is Serena looking out for those two?! I don't mind the Daughter of God, but that general! She's got no reason to help him!"

"...But... He's injured. Helping others is important."

"I know that! It just doesn't sit right with me, and I refuse to let it slide!"

Something Auguste doesn't know about must have happened between those three and Isaac. There's no way she would have cooperated otherwise. He understands that, and he wouldn't strike a man who's that torn up, but Auguste thought he should at least be allowed to get angry in private.

Auguste hasn't forgotten what the general did to Serena.

“I know Serena’s concerned about the Daughter of God, and she’s only paying attention to the general because the Daughter of God cares about him! I can tell just by watching them, but still!”

“...I see.”

“Argh, I hate this. I’m really bad at this stuff.”

He doesn’t want to accumulate things he can’t forgive. He doesn’t think it’s an okay thing to do. They’ll turn into excuses to attack somebody else someday, and sooner or later, they’ll blow up in his face.

Besides, Serena is the victim here. Auguste has no right to be angry at Ares. He’s finally learned that Serena can’t stand men who aren’t able to make those distinctions.

As Auguste trudges along, pushing the serving cart, he hears a voice behind him. “...Prince Cedric broke his engagement to Aileen. I think...he picked an awful way to do it.”

When he stops and looks back, Quartz continues, looking very serious, “I...and Luc, and Denis, and Jasper. None of us have forgiven him for that. Although Isaac doesn’t look like it, I bet he took it the hardest... But I don’t think Prince Cedric and Maracas are the ones we really can’t forgive. It’s ourselves, for not being able to protect Aileen.”

“B-but Ailey really relies on all of you!”

“Yes. And so...we can’t get the wrong idea. Forgiving the other guy, forgiving ourselves... It’s not about that. The important thing is, what’s going to help Aileen?”

The answer is dispassionate, but sincere.

“I think you...can do that.”

“Do you? I’m not confident.”

“Even if you can’t now...you’re a good guy, so...”

After that, Quartz falls silent and starts walking again.

Auguste stands there stunned for a second. Then he smiles a little. His vision

seems clearer. *That's right. If I screw up any worse than I already have, James says he'll demote me for real.*

He has to get it together. Serena is merciless. If she finds out he's in danger of being demoted, his newfound hope will probably shatter.

Accompanied by Quartz, he hands the first meal to Luc, who has dark circles under his eyes. Then, since it's on his way, he takes the medicine from Quartz and heads toward the room Serena, Sahra, and Ares are sharing. Since everyone there needs to be kept under guard, the room has been locked, and James has shielded it with magic. Auguste has the key.

Serena gets sarcastic about it, but it's proof of how much Aileen and the others trust him. He's sure it's connected to the success Serena hopes for.

"Sorry it took me so long to get back."

"You took forever! I can't sleep unless you take over for me, you know! Honestly!"

"Oh, hey— Don't you need to eat?"

"Right before bed? Not unless I want to be fat. I'll eat when I wake up."

Besides, he's noticed a few things.

Ares watches the unconscious Sahra with genuine worry in his eyes.

Serena, who's tense and on edge, won't relax and sleep unless Auguste is in the room.

It's okay if you can't forgive him. Just think about what you can do.

He has no interest in becoming a Holy Knight, but he's determined to be a man who's worthy of the name.

James has led Aileen and Walt into the courtyard of the old castle.

The front of the castle took the most damage during the battle, and the courtyard is only littered with rubble from the broken walls and roof. It's quiet and deserted, though: The usual sunbathing demons aren't there.

Perhaps the instructions to hide themselves as thoroughly as possible got through to them.

If so, this sight should make her happy, but it's rather lonely.

"The Holy Dragon Consort plans to land here?"

"I'll call her, but don't hope for too much. I'm a cambion. She's one of the highest-ranking demons in existence. If we wanted to make her listen, we'd need Master Claude, Beelzebuth...or Keith and his authority as the demon king's proxy."

As James gazes up into the sky, Aileen's eyes focus on his profile. "Can Sir Keith still use that authority?"

"Yes. After Master Claude regained his memories, he conferred it on him again. There was talk of giving it to me, but I declined."

"Right, right; this guy's half demon, see? He said if anything happened to Master Claude, he'd be affected, so there was no point. Is he too serious by half or what?" Walt points at James.

James doesn't turn a hair. "Call it a rational decision. Besides, it's better if proxy authority never has to be used."

"In the first place, does this situation count as 'something having happened' to Master Claude? Would the proxy authority be valid? He is in the Queendom of Hausel, after all."

My son's body, he said. At the very least, then, that is Claude's body, and he hasn't lost his magic. It's subtly different from the time when he lost both his memories and his magic and wasn't able to link to the demons' minds.

"I imagine we'd be able to use it. That one counts more as Master Luciel than Master Claude, as far as we're concerned."

"But Master Luciel is still himself."

"It always did feel as if there were two Master Luciels. The one in human shape can be reasoned with, but the true form is beyond that. It definitely exists, though. Right now, Master Claude has taken the true form's place in the demon realm. Therefore, that isn't him."

"...Yes, you're right. He's been taken over by the true form, after all."

"That means we can't contact the current demon king. In other words,

‘something has happened,’ and the proxy authority will be valid... Provided Keith is awake to use it.”

This is important, even though it will only be helpful if Keith regains consciousness.

“Do you suppose we could use Sir Keith’s proxy authority to find Master Luciel?”

“No. It can only be used to issue orders to demons whose rank is below Master Claude’s. Master Luciel is his equal. Searching for him when he’s hidden himself is equivalent to violating Master Claude’s orders. Similarly, telling him to come out would be like issuing an order to Master Claude. It wouldn’t work.”

“I see... Then we’ll just have to search for him ourselves. Still, that’s reassuring: Master Claude hasn’t vanished,” Aileen murmurs.

Just then there’s a gust of wind, and a shadow wheels overhead.

“Holy Dragon Consort...!”

With a brief roar, the Holy Dragon Consort flaps down to land in the courtyard.

She’s the daughter of the demon king, beautiful and beloved, her lithe, fishlike body covered in glimmering white scales.

“We’ve been expecting you, Your Highness. Ellmeyer welcomes you.”

Aileen has greeted the Holy Dragon Consort like she’s the queen of another country, and the dragon throws out her chest proudly. The jewels in her decorative collar sparkle brilliantly as they catch the sunlight. She seems to be flaunting her dignity.

Originally, the water dragon was very timid and shy. However, Aileen has heard that she is striving to conduct herself as a great and ancient demon in an attempt to rival Roxane, the principal consort.

Fighting back a smile, Aileen gives a deep curtsy. “Pardon my haste, but to what do we owe the honor of this visit? If you’ve come to see Master Claude, I’m afraid he isn’t...”

Dealing with a demon has made her careless: She falters, unsure how to

describe the situation.

He isn't dead. He hasn't been kidnapped. He has "gone away." That isn't Claude, and yet it is. Her resolution to retake him hasn't wavered, but...

She's on the verge of hanging her head when something ticklish brushes her cheek. It's one of the Holy Dragon Consort's long whiskers. When she looks up, the dragon is watching her with eyes as clear as glass beads, as if she's worried. She's trying to comfort her.

Forcing a smile, Aileen stands straighter. "I beg your pardon. Unfortunately, the crown prince is absent. If I might hear your request—"

Before she can finish, the Holy Dragon Consort points at her own side with one of her front claws.

Upon close inspection, Aileen notices a leather satchel hanging from the dragon's shoulder. Charmingly, it seems to have been made especially for her; it's just the right size. It even has her name, *MANA*, embroidered on it. Did Roxane stitch that?

"May I open this?"

The Holy Dragon Consort nods. As if he's heard something, James looks up. "She says she came to bring us what's in that bag. Consort Roxane asked her to."

"It's from Lady Roxane?"

Saying "Pardon me," Walt circles around to the satchel. The Holy Dragon Consort shifts a little, as if she's embarrassed. However, Walt empties the bag of its contents with the chivalry of someone helping a noble lady, and Mana holds still until he's finished.

"She says that, since she's the Holy Dragon Consort, she can't lose."

"To whom? Lady Roxane?"

The dragon nods again.

James continues, "Master Baal is sad, so as his consorts, they've formed a temporary alliance."

“Whoa, what is this? It’s heavy. A dictionary? And...a journal?”

When Aileen sees the book in Walt’s hands, her eyes widen. *Amelia Dark’s journal?!*

Before she takes the volume, a little jolt of magic runs from the dragon’s whisker to her cheek. When she turns to look at her, the Holy Dragon Consort is watching her with quiet eyes. “Have you shared some of your magic with me? But why— Holy Dragon Consort!”

With a great beat of her wings, the dragon has risen into the sky.

“She says she’s worried about Master Baal, so she’s going home.”

But she only just arrived, Aileen thinks, then decides not to say anything. It wouldn’t be wise for the Holy Dragon Consort to stay too long. If people get the impression that she’s abandoned the Kingdom of Ashmael, it would only complicate matters further.

“Also— She says to ‘keep it a secret,’” James interprets.

Aileen looks up at the dragon, watching her climb into the sky. The Holy Dragon Consort circles elegantly, then seemingly grows smaller and smaller in the space of a breath before vanishing over the horizon.

A secret... Does she mean that magic, just now?

Aileen takes from Walt what the dragon left with them. As she suspected, one is the book she and Baal found in Ashmael and had assumed to be Amelia Dark’s journal.

“And this is...a dictionary. It appears to be from Lady Roxane’s personal collection.”

“A dictionary of what? I’ve never seen those characters before.”

“—It’s the old tongue of the Queendom of Hausel.”

The characters haven’t been used since the languages were standardized, five hundred years ago. James likes this sort of thing, and he leans in to look, his eyes shining slightly. “A dictionary of the Queendom’s ancient language? When Hausel created the standard tongue, they said something about the characters they’d formerly used having spell-like properties, and they burned most of what

remained in other countries. I'm impressed this survived... I imagine it's never left the building where it's housed before."

"I'm told Lady Roxane is a woman of academic talents that rival many historians'... And this dictionary translates the old tongue of the Queendom into the old tongue of the Kingdom of Ashmael. I wonder if I'll be able to read it. Oh, but the journal is locked—"

Handing the dictionary to James, she picks up the journal, only to discover that it isn't locked now.

Even though it wasn't supposed to open until her wish was granted.

Does that mean it has already happened?

Pressing her lips into a thin line, she opens the cover. A little jolt of the same magic the Holy Dragon Consort shared with her runs through her hand.

As it does, she feels something start to drag her in.

"?!"

"Ailey?!"

Walt's yell, James's face as he turns— Everything warps and swirls as she's drawn into the journal.

She doesn't have time to even consider struggling.

It can't be— Did the Holy Dragon Consort cast some sort of spell on me?!

Even as the thought occurs to her, the scenery changes.

All she can see is sky. It's perfectly cloudless, nothing but blue on all sides—and Aileen is right in the middle of it. In other words, she's falling.

"—?!"

It's the same sensation she felt when she was dropped out of that night sky, once upon a time, and she gives a wordless scream. Aileen doesn't have the sacred sword or the protection of Claude's magic now. If she's dashed to the ground, that will be that.

P-perhaps I could use the Holy Dragon Consort's magic for something— No, I really can't, can I?!

It's no use. She's going to die.

Just as she's reached that oddly calm conclusion, a pair of arms snatches her up. When she hears her rescuer's feet hit the ground, Aileen lets out the breath she's been holding.

"Are you all right?"

It's a woman's voice, rather low. The light is behind her, and she can't see her face. However, the beautiful black hair that falls across Aileen's cheek makes her call a name. "Master Clau..."

Wings flutter, and a stiff gale drowns out her words. Aileen's hair whips around her face, and she looks up into the sky. The first thing she sees are tall trees. In the gaps between them, she catches glimpses of—a dragon. Its coloration is oddly dull. Is it a child? It's still quite small.

Gently setting the wide-eyed Aileen down at the base of a tree, the woman straightens up. "Drat, it got away. That thing couldn't be any more of a hassle."

"Um, I..."

"Oh, beg pardon. You just appeared in the sky, out of nowhere. Am I right in assuming you don't know where you are?"

It isn't safe to talk about herself to a complete stranger, even if that stranger is a woman.

Aileen knows this, but she nods anyway. She can't help noticing that the way this woman speaks sounds like Claude.

"I thought not. I'm sorry. It looks like you've been dragged into this."

"Dragged into...what?"

"...You look like an ordinary human. Erm, do you suppose you could hear me out without fainting?"

She nods again.

The woman crouches down, putting herself on Aileen's eye level.

Those lovely violet eyes make her gasp. That straight black hair. She didn't immediately realize it's the same face because, although the features are nearly

identical, its vitality is completely different.

“You’re in the demon realm.”

“Th-the demon realm?”

“That’s right. I think there’s been a bit of a mix-up, and you’ve been dragged into our situation. I’ll take responsibility and make sure you get home, so I want you to trust me.”

“T-trust you...? I, um... May I ask your name?”

She does ask, although she isn’t sure she needs to.

“Sure.” Giving her a smile, the woman responds mildly, “The name is Grace Dark. You may have heard of me.”

“Y-yes, I...have...”

“I genuinely am the Maid of the Sacred Sword, so don’t worry.”

Aileen nods. *I see, yes. That isn’t reassuring at all.*



With a crisp, cool sound, a fruit knife slices the peel off an apple in one thin strip. Lilia rather likes that noise and the task itself. Something that was round and whole unravels into a spiral, laying the delicious flesh bare.

“There you are, Cedric. I made some bunny-shaped ones, too. Aren’t they sweet?”

“...Thanks, Lilia.”

Cedric glances at the plate she’s set on the bedside table. His voice is hoarse. Both his face and his body are liberally gauzed and bandaged in multiple places; it’s a pitiful sight.

He’s bruised and lacerated from head to toe. Considering what his injuries could have been, though, Cedric got off easy. The woman attacked the crystal’s interior in an attempt to break him. If she’d aimed just a little differently, he would have been torn apart along the cracks in the crystal, crushed to a pulp.

The thought makes something very cold settle in the depths of Lilia's stomach. Not fear. Anger. "I really am sorry. If I hadn't provoked that woman..."

"Don't worry about it. I'm the one who should apologize. I held you back."

"That's not true. Having you there is what lets me do my very best."

Glibly, she rattles off a line she doesn't really mean, something that Lilia would say.

When did she first realize she does this because it's the only way she knows how?

"What about you? You aren't hurt?"

"No, I'm fine. Mine were only scratches, and I healed them up right away. I am technically the Maid of the Sacred Sword, you know."

"I see. I'm glad."

"...You aren't asking me anything. You haven't said anything, either."

"It's rather late for that."

I see. It's too late, hmm? Lowering her gaze, Lilia gazes coldly at the fruit knife.

"Even about the fact that I lost?"

Cedric is sitting up in the magnificent canopy bed. Moving carefully, he turns his head to look at her. "Are you depressed about it?"

"I... Perhaps?"

She doesn't really know. When she tells him so, honestly, Cedric gives her a wry smile. "That's not like you."

"It isn't? Yes, you may be right. I haven't been myself for ages now."

However, ever since the moment she sensed that Cedric might be killed, something's been boiling inside her.

It's terribly unpleasant.

She's irritated, just as she was in her previous life. It's as if she's alive.

"...Is there anything I can do?" Cedric seems to have picked up on her mood. His tone is solicitous.

Gazing steadily into his quiet eyes, as an experiment, Lilia says exactly what comes into her head. “Kiss me.”

“Huh?! —Ow!”

Startled, Cedric has tried to get up, and he writhes in pain.

He looks ridiculous. The sight blows the unpleasant feeling away, and Lilia laughs a little. “Goodness, Cedric, I was only joking.”

“J-joking. I see, that was a joke, of course.”

It isn't as if they've never kissed before. Why is this character getting flustered?

Oh, but we haven't actually kissed since we began living in confinement, have we.

It isn't as if she particularly wanted to, so she didn't even notice he'd stopped trying to kiss her. She'd completed the Cedric route, so there was no need for that sort of thing. Besides, she got caught up in observing Aileen's romance with the demon king, and she forgot. She, the heroine of an *otome* game.

The thought strikes her as funny. She sets the fruit knife on the side table, then sits down on the edge of the bed. “But if you kiss me, Cedric, I think I'll be able to win.”

As she slowly closes in on him, Cedric's eyes dart around anxiously. Apparently he doesn't see this as an irresistible invitation. His fingers hover in midair, unable even to pull her shoulders to him in an embrace. “W-win...? At what?”

“Against that woman, or Lady Aileen, or the hardworking heroines perhaps?”

“I—I don't understand.”

“Against you, then.” She fixes him with a cold, flat look.

Cedric stammers. “B-but you've already beaten...me.”

“...I suppose I have.”

“Y-you're teasing me, aren't you! Don't joke like—”

“Hey, are you in there?!”

The bedchamber's double doors fly open with a bang. Cedric gasps and freezes up, but Lilia tilts her head prettily. "Gracious, Serena. Have you come to pay a visit to Cedric, since he's injured?"

"Why would I be visiting that half-wit? I'm not interested in him anymore. You! I'm here for you!"

"What? No. Ew. The only woman I'd swing for is Lady Aileen, so—"

"Nobody's talking about that! Never mind, just come on!"

While Lilia's making reluctant noises and dragging her feet, the other girl grabs her arm. Auguste stumbles into the bedchamber on Serena's heels; he's out of breath. "Serena! The procedures for visiting the second prince aren't— Oh, for the love of—! I'm sorry, Prince Cedric! Oh, right, I'm using the authority of the Holy Knights to borrow Lady Lilia for a minute!"

"R-right... The authority of the Holy Knights? Has something happened?"

"Um— Serena, wait!" Auguste yells, but Serena doesn't even glance back.

The girl's extreme lack of thought appalls Lilia, too. "Don't you feel sorry for him? He's cleaning up after you, you know."

"It's fine; there's no time."

"Hmm. When a wife disgraces herself, it's fairly common for her husband to take the blame and get demoted."

"This is more important! Besides, I don't want to hear that from you."

Well, of course not, she thinks, but she's also a little startled: Serena used to get angry when anyone talked about her and Auguste like that.

Serena, who's walking with her head held high, is the heroine of Game 2. Saddled with an unfortunate family situation, in an attempt to improve her life, she entered a school in which men were considered superior to women. She is the Saint of Salvation, a girl who hung in there and won a brighter future while saving her fellow female students from similarly unfortunate circumstances. That is why her power has blossomed, although it happened rather late.

The same is true of Sahra. She's far more like the Daughter of God now than when she was being worshipped and waited on in Ashmael. Even after going

through a thing like that, she's trying to save Ares and protect their future. The strength and depth of her affection are truly fit for a heroine.

What about her, then?

Has Lilia Reinoise been a suitable Maid of the Sacred Sword?

"What?"

Her steady gaze seems to have made Serena suspicious. As the other girl strides down the hall, she shoots her a glare. Lilia smiles back. "It's nothing. What's this about? We seem to be heading for the old castle."

As Serena takes her through corridors meant for the imperial castle's servants as if she knows them well, she says, "Its courtyard, actually. That woman, your 'Lady Aileen' — She's vanished."

"What?"

"Just come on," Serena says, walking faster.

Lilia is sure she'll be unwelcome in the demon king's castle. The idea thrills her, but possibly because the demons aren't there, no one tries to run the two of them off.

When they enter the courtyard, they get dreadful looks from the cambion, the two human weapons, and particularly the flunkies who belong to that group Aileen runs, the Oberon Trading Firm. They're quite obviously not welcome here, and it makes her smile shine brighter.

"And? What's happened to Lady Aileen?"

"She, um, seems to have disappeared into a journal Ashmael's Holy Dragon Consort brought."

"A journal? That's the first I've heard of it. Gracious, Lady Aileen! She's been keeping secrets."

"Where's Auguste? Why did you bring that woman here?" The half demon final boss glares at them, not bothering to hide his suspicion.

Serena glares right back at him. "Auguste's on his way. If anyone will know what happened to that woman, it's this one; they're each as crazy as the other!

Never mind that, just give me the journal.”

She has several issues with the way Serena’s phrased that, but her curiosity wins out. Her eyes go to the journal the cambion is holding.

Then—with an “Oh!”—she claps her hands together in recognition. “Why, it’s the save data!”

“Huhn?”

“I see, so Lady Aileen got pulled into this? Where on earth did she get it?”

James is standing there, stunned. Briskly taking the journal out of his hand, she flips through it, but it’s written in a script she can’t read.

As everyone else hesitates, Serena answers her question. “Ashmael’s former fiend dragon said the principal consort asked her to bring it.”

“The water dragon, right. Then— Wait, what?! Oh, that’s not fair! That’s completely not fair!”

Realizing where Aileen has gone, Lilia flips the journal upside down and shakes it, flapping the pages, but it’s only a journal. There’s no response.

“Arrrgh, it’s not fair! That’s so not faaaair, Lady Aileen! Why didn’t she invite me?!”

“Wh-what? What’s this about? Don’t tear it!” Recovering, James hastily takes the journal from Lilia. She allows him to have it without a fight and lets her shoulders fall.

The water dragon, now the Holy Dragon Consort, also appears in a secret event in Game 4. The goal of the event is to vanquish the Time Dragon, who steals objects and kidnaps people from anywhere in space and time. The culprit is a dragon who’s searching for her companions and is too young to control her magic. Amelia and Luciel talk the dragon into maturing into the water dragon, and the event ends with her departure for Ashmael, which is still just a desert region. This had probably been a bonus for fans of Game 3, the previous game. Lilia knew that Ashmael’s fiend dragon was a water dragon because she was familiar with this event.

The event’s trigger conditions were fairly elaborate and the window was brief,

so it was often overlooked. Considering the things Aileen has known about so far, she probably played carelessly. She hasn't retrieved the game art; no doubt she either overlooked the event or skipped it. Either that, or perhaps she didn't realize that the young dragon had turned into the fiend dragon.

"It's all right; Lady Aileen's only been pulled into the Time Dragon event from Game 4. You can clear that one just by reading the text. She'll be back before long."

"...What are you talking about?"

"Even if she tells you, you won't understand, so don't ask. We just need to wait, then, yes?" Serena asks.

Lilia nods, puffing out her cheeks sulkily. "Yes, just wait. Rrgh, I wish I could have gone with her... Oh! But maybe reading this journal will be the same as playing through?!"

"...You sound like you know what the journal is." Walt looks dubious.

Lilia shrugs. "It's Amelia Dark's journal, isn't it? Of course I know that."

"Why?" Kyle asks, clearly wary.

"I told you, you won't get any decent answers from this woman, so just let it go. She's funny in the head." Serena dismisses his question entirely.

Feeling quietly impressed by how useful this character is turning out to be, Lilia finally manages to let go of her frustration over missing a trip to the world of Game 4. "While we're waiting for Lady Aileen, let's read the journal. After all, it was written by that woman, the one from the Queendom of Hausel. Maybe we'll be lucky, and she'll have noted down a weakness or something."

"Are we going to let her read it?" One of Aileen's flunkies, a man in a white lab coat, eyes Lilia with obvious suspicion.

James folds his arms, looking very weary. "Letting her read it isn't the issue; it isn't easily read. It's written in the Queendom's old tongue, and its very characters are something even members of the nobility may see only once in a lifetime, if ever. On top of that, the dictionary sent to help us translate it is in the Kingdom of Ashmael's old tongue. It would take more than an ordinary

education to read either one.”

“You’re a noble. Can’t you read them?”

“I wasn’t given a noble’s education.”

“Then why not ask the holy king, or the principal consort who sent this?”

“I suspect the Holy Dragon Consort brought it without telling the holy king. If we contact him, he’ll probably tell us to give it back.”

“We’ve got the Daughter of God and the holy general. What if we threatened him with them?”

“I considered it, but now doesn’t seem like the time... No doubt Master Claude could have read it, if he were here.”

“Oh, then we do have someone who can read it, don’t we.”

Serena and James stop arguing and look at Lilia.

As everyone else focuses on her, Lilia smiles brightly. “Anyone with an education at the demon king’s level could, correct? In that case, we already have someone. Someone who was trained thoroughly enough to replace him as emperor.”

The others exchange confused glances, as if they can’t think of anyone. Privately, Lilia pouts.

The character who is Lilia’s fiancé was written to be a brilliant, magnificent crown prince, and yet nobody’s thought of him. How rude.

◆ Eighth Act ◆

The Villainess's Dark History

“In other words, you’re saying the dragon brought me here?” Aileen asks.

Grace nods. She’s currently starting a fire.

Outside the forest, up on a hill with a fine view of the surrounding country, a pleasant wind blows. The long white tail of Grace’s military uniform flutters, and a panel of embroidered roses unfolds.

The crest of the Queendom of Hausel... That’s a knight’s uniform, isn’t it?

She’s never seen a version for women, so she isn’t certain. However, if the uniforms shown in the art from the game were modified for women, they would probably look like this.

The question is, why is Grace wearing it?

Grace the villainess had strong sacred power, but she was too physically frail to leave her bed. Behind her saintly mask, she’d busily come up with sordid schemes to secure the throne for herself.

On top of that, she was supposed to have died centuries ago.

Perhaps she’s a lady knight of the Queendom who just happens to have the same name?!

“That dragon’s parents died when it was young, and it has no kin. It’s developed a habit of collecting objects that bear traces of its companions, and it will grab anything: past or future, human or object, it doesn’t matter. It summons anything it wants to the demon realm, and the Queendom of Hausel has marked it for punishment.”



As she listens, Aileen resigns herself.

Yes, this is the Time Dragon subjugation event! That hidden event in Game 4.

In other words, this is the stage of Game 4, nearly seven hundred years in the past. The beautiful woman in uniform has to be the villainess, Grace Dark. It makes no sense, but nothing else seems possible.

“Ordinarily, it should have reached adulthood and shed its skin long ago, but apparently it’s been coddled. It’s constantly causing mischief. Once it matures, its power will stabilize and it won’t be able to cause so much trouble anymore, so I’m trying to make it stop.”

“Make it stop? How, specifically?”

“To begin with, I told it to knock it off already and punched it,” the woman says with a straight face. Aileen freezes up. “Then it threw a tantrum and pulled in things from all over. It even made ancient weapons rain from the sky. You came down with them.”

“I-is that so... Um, what happened to the weapons?”

“Oh, they were no match for the sacred sword. I’m confident in my fighting skills.” Grace laughs lightly, although none of this seems humorous to Aileen.

Putting on a polite smile, she asks a timid question. “But...if you attack demons, doesn’t the demon king, um...get angry...?”

“It’s fine. He was blathering about feeling sorry for it, so I sent him flying.”

The unfortunate phrase *Violence solves everything* surfaces in her mind.

“He ‘feels sorry for it,’ my eye! He’s used that as an excuse to leave the child to its own devices for centuries; it’s appalling. I wager it’s the demon king’s fault that it’s so lonely. If he’d looked after it properly, it would have grown into a fine dragon even without its parents. Now it’s being called the Time Dragon or some such, and people are trying to hunt it down. Where does he get off, criticizing me for being mean to a young dragon?!”

Grace sits down with a thump. She does have a point.

“The demon king’s all talk. The demons are undisciplined. They’ve caused a

nuisance for you, too; I'm sorry. If I'd gotten that kick in, I could have stopped it before its spell activated. This happened because I held back."

"You...did hold back, then."

"Naturally. However, if I can't get through to it with words, I've got no choice but to use my fists. If I don't, the child won't survive. It can't even control its magic, and it's hurting people."

As she gazes at the scenery on the other side of the hill, her eyes radiate a dignified conviction.

"If it hurries and grows up, then learns how to live without clashing needlessly with humans, its world will expand. Even if its companions are gone, it may meet new ones. As it stands, this situation can't possibly be all right. Ten years or so would be one thing, but it's been centuries."

"...Well, yes, that is rather futile."

Besides, the sadness caused by losing important things and people will come back to bite the young demon someday. She agrees with Grace that it must be stopped.

"And so you have been dispatched by the Queendom of Hausel to do something about the dragon, Lady Grace?" She's assumed as much from what she knows of the game developments and the current situation, but Grace gives her a blank look. The expression flusters her. "I-if I'm wrong, I apologize. I'm afraid I don't know very much about these things."

"Hmm... Well, we haven't even been married six months yet."

"M-married? To whom?"

"Hmm? You don't know that, either? I had thought I was rather notorious... Is it possible you're from a few years in the past? Now that I'm looking, you aren't dressed like a citizen of the Queendom. If you're from another land, then it makes even more sense that you don't know..."

Chronologically, she's gone in the wrong direction, but Aileen ducks the question by looking uneasy.

Grace doesn't seem to sense anything odd in this. She continues, "Were you

aware that I'm the Maid of the Sacred Sword?"

"N-no...yes?"

"Which is it? Oh, I see; have you gotten my story mixed up with that of my sister, Amelia?"

"I-if you wouldn't mind, could you tell me that story?! I do know of a woman named Grace Dark, but I'm vague on the details, and I'm not certain that you two are the same person. Besides, unless I know what sort of person you are, I won't be able to decide whether I can trust you!"

As openings go, it's rather forced, but Grace nods as if it makes sense. Fortunately, she seems to have the same careless personality as Claude.

"I'll start by introducing myself, then. Just ignore anything you already know. I am Grace Dark. I was taking the royal exam as the queen of Hausel's daughter but withdrew partway through. People sometimes call me the Maid of the Sacred Sword, but I've married the demon king, you see."

Now I'm the demon king's wife.

What else could Aileen do but nod? She's convinced, though.

Luciel's beloved wife isn't that unsettling, doll-like woman.

It's this one. The one he called the Maid of the Sacred Sword.

"—'To be honest, life at the academy is trying. It's all I can do to keep up in my studies. However, I have been chosen, and so I will work hard and become queen. After all, even Her Majesty seems to favor me. Besides, if I'm here, I may be able to meet *him* again...' You can't mean for me to just read the whole thing, can you?"

"Yes, Cedric. You can do it! Hurry, hurry, keep going!"

Lilia is enjoying herself far too much. She sits right beside Cedric on the bed, clinging to him and coaxing.

Possibly out of concern for Cedric's throat, since he's been talking all this time, Marcus offers him a pitcher of water. When Lilia returned from the old castle's courtyard, he was already here. Lester made the arrangements and Aileen gave permission, which was how Marcus was promoted from the West

Tower security detail to Cedric's bodyguard.

Out of consideration for Cedric's injuries, the audience for the journal reading has been limited. The only ones present are Lilia and Marcus, Serena, James, and Auguste. James is in charge of transcribing what Cedric reads to them. Walt and Kyle are standing guard outside, to make sure no one else enters.

Cedric was taken aback by his uninvited guests, but he didn't balk at the idea of sharing information with Aileen's camp. Whatever he may claim, Cedric idolizes his half brother. He wants them to save him.

And he thinks Aileen, not Lilia, is the one who can do it.

"? Lilia?"

"Never mind, just hurry up. Keep reading." She clings to his arm tightly, urging him on.

Sighing, Cedric turns the page. "...She skips several days between entries, and lots of them are short. She must have been busy. Some of this looks like notes for the royal exam."

"Read it, read it. Does she mention 'his' name?"

"No... The royal exam is about to start, she says. On the day after this date."

"Oh! That's it, then! The first test is the labyrinth expedition; his name should come up there!"

Everyone looks at her as if they're wondering how she knows, but no one says anything.

Cedric nods quietly. "A labyrinth expedition... Yes, you're right. She describes it as a test in which they have to bring a certain object back from the depths of the labyrinth. However, this says that a demon appeared during the test. It was an accident, not part of the exam... 'He' saved her then, and she learned his name. It was, um, Lucife— No, that's not it. It looks like 'Luciel,' but... This is..."

"I knew it!" She claps her hands in delight, and still no one says anything. It seems that everyone's learned to take Serena's advice. This is quite pleasant.

"And? Did Grace Dark take first place in the labyrinth expedition?"

“No, it was Amelia.”

“What? That’s amazing. Who’d have thought she’d surpass Grace...”

It isn’t impossible, but unless the player is extremely efficient, it’s very difficult to outstrip Grace during the first test. She’s openly impressed, and it seems to have shifted Cedric’s interest to Grace.

“Grace Dark...barely managed to pass. Or rather, they seem to have made an exception for her.”

“Did they find out she’d cheated?!”

Grace, who was physically frail, had gotten through the royal exam using underhanded methods. That had precipitated the condemnation event and was the direct cause of her elimination from the royal exam.

“No. It says she fought the demon that appeared in the labyrinth, destroying both demon and labyrinth so that the royal candidates who were inside could escape.”

She didn’t see that one coming.

“Since she’d proved the strength of her sacred power, she did pass. Most of the candidates she’d saved retired from the exam, which kept the number of successful candidates within the limit. The journal says, ‘It isn’t as if she passed the test, so it doesn’t seem right that they didn’t disqualify her.’ That suggests that she was treated as a special case.”

“...Hmm. What about the second test? The one where they formed teams and worked together to trap demons in crystals.”

“Just a minute... Found it. Amelia took first place again. Apparently her score was the highest in history. But...this is...”

“...Grace?”

Cedric nods, looking grave. “She didn’t see the point of capturing the demons in crystals. Instead, she knocked out all the demons provided for the test, one after another, and tossed them back into the demon realm directly. There were many witnesses, so this didn’t disqualify her.”

“...She sounds even stranger than Lady Aileen, doesn’t she?”

Nobody objects to Lilia's observation.

She folds her arms, thinking hard. She didn't predict this development. "It's true that Grace was supposed to have strong sacred power, but... What does Amelia say?"

"That it's favoritism. She says she must be getting special treatment because she's the queen's daughter."

"Well, you can hardly blame her for that. I'd suspect her, too," Serena says.

"Grace didn't seem inclined to take the test properly, so Amelia tried to find out what she was up to. Grace told her, 'I don't plan to become queen,' and sent her away. Apparently she said, 'You can have the throne.' Amelia thinks she's mocking her, and she's very annoyed."

"For someone who was genuinely trying to become queen, that probably would be really irritating to hear." Marcus looks glum.

Cedric continues, his eyes on the journal, "There were complaints from other royal candidates as well...but the voices of outsiders recommending Grace as the next queen were louder. Grace said she was more suited to becoming a knight who protected the queen, and she'd often patrol the town in a knight's uniform. For better or worse, she stood out."

"Ah. So she was popular with the common people, and they couldn't fail her even if they wanted to," Serena says, summarizing.

Cedric nods. "Apparently so. Amelia doesn't seem to have appreciated that, either. From this point on, there's a lot more invective. 'She should just disappear,' for example. This is a journal, and it's fine to think things like that as long as one doesn't act on them, but even so. Then... The third test comes next, but before that, she learned the truth of her birth. It sounds as though she and Grace were twins. Retainers who believed twins were inauspicious made attempts on their lives, so Amelia and her father were forced to flee to Mirchetta."

That development happened at the same point in the game.

However, given the circumstances, there was no way Amelia would feel the way she had there.

Cedric turns the page. His eyes widen, and he falls silent. Lilia presses him for details. “What does Amelia say, once she knows?”

“...I’m just going to read it. ‘In other words, Grace and I could easily have changed places? No— If it weren’t for Grace, would I always have been everyone’s favorite, fawned on and respected as the queen’s only daughter? Would I have been spared being so confounded by my studies and embarrassing myself?’”

Amelia spent her childhood with her father. In order to completely cut their ties with the Queendom of Hausel, her father didn’t take any support, and they weren’t wealthy. However, he raised her with plenty of affection. In fact, her father’s family was granted the Duchy of Mirchetta, now a sister nation to Ellmeyer.

However.

“‘Mother—’ From this point on, that’s what she calls the queen of Hausel. ‘Mother has prophesied that I have wondrous potential. I may become queen, or something even greater: a saint who saves the world. But that only makes it stranger. If that’s true, then why didn’t she keep me? She said Grace was too fragile to send away, but that’s just an excuse! I am suited to becoming queen, and I should have been raised here!’”

Withholding something that was better by a very slight difference...

“‘That’s why people say outlandish things like “Grace is the one who’s suited to be queen”! Why do I have to hear “You be the queen” from Grace, of all people?!’”

Her sister, Grace, laughed and said she’d yield the throne. She’d rather be the knight who protected it.

That wasn’t even funny. Winning the position by defeating her would be one thing, but getting it as a mere concession from her? The idea of a life in which the two of them were constantly compared made Amelia sick.

This destiny wasn’t correct. And so...

“—‘She should vanish. Grace is delighted to have gained a sweet younger sister in me, and more than anything, she’s a fool. I’m sure it will work. The

other royal candidates dislike her as well. It will be easy. I'll just make it look as if she's run away before the final test.'"

She'd drop her into the demon realm. That way she'd never be able to come back.

This development was just as it was in the game, and yet completely different.

"Then—Amelia Dark pushed her sister into the demon realm?! They do say that Grace had an affair with the demon king and that he manipulated her, turning her into his pawn, and that the Maid of the Sacred Sword killed her sister, grieving over what she had become, but if it was like this..."

Marcus covers his mouth with a hand. He's well versed in history.

James sighs, his writing hand falling still. "It would be an effective way to force her out of the royal exam. Even if she returned from the demon realm, people would suspect she'd been affected by it. More than anything, the exam would likely be over by then."

"This is kind of sad, isn't it? I mean, they'd finally found out they were sisters..."

"Don't be dumb. She can't forgive her *because* they're sisters. I'm never forgiving my uncle's family, either."

"...Sorry. I don't have family, so it just seems like a waste to me," Auguste says softly.

Serena looks up, startled, then averts her eyes uncomfortably. Those eyes meet Lilia's, who's been watching this, and she glares at her. "What? If there's something you want to say, just say it."

"Huh? No thanks. This is silly... Still, that's right. That's exactly how it went, isn't it?"

When her cheating was exposed before the final exam, in an attempt to bring down her sister, Grace tried to communicate secretly with the demon king. She fell into the demon realm, where its king made her into a convenient puppet. In the game, Amelia felt pity for her and slew her with the sacred sword.

“Superficially, it’s just like the game, but... What happened next?”

“Oh, erm. After Grace vanishes, she calms down quite a lot. She does seem uneasy about the fact that the final exam has no time limit.”

“The final exam was ‘Teach the god who rules the demons to love,’ wasn’t it? Has she made any progress with Luciel? Did they go out for cake before the final exam, say?”

“...Yes. She says he encouraged her in her studies and gave her flowers in a gesture of support. He’d seemed quite cold before, but lately he’s been kind, and she’s delighted about it. A little while after the final exam was announced, they begin to see each other more frequently... Between this and that, they meet once every two weeks. This goes on for six months or so.”

She was romancing the hero properly, then.

“By the way, has a ‘Time Dragon’ made an appearance?”

“Hmm? Oh, this. She and Luciel discuss rumors that a dragon is perpetrating mischief of some sort, and she says he seems anxious...but other than that, there’s nothing. If anything, she learns that people suspect Luciel of communicating with demons, and it’s made her uneasy. Partly due to Grace’s disappearance, people have grown warier of the demon realm. Demons are appearing more frequently, and the royal candidates are hard-pressed to return the ones they’ve captured in crystals to the demon realm—”

“Then the demon king should declare war soon.”

She can’t read it, but she’s peeking into the journal along with Cedric. He turns a page, then freezes.

“What’s the matter?”

“She says...Grace has returned. She has the sacred sword, and she’s married to the demon king.”

Ohhh, I really do wish I’d gone to the world of Game 4 with Lady Aileen, Lilia thinks with all her heart.

“Um... In other words, Lady Grace, your health was so fragile as a child that you almost died. On that occasion, your mother told people not to worry, for

your life wasn't destined to end here. Which convinced you that pushing yourself a little wouldn't kill you. Although the doctors tried to stop you, you began strength training, and since you nearly died multiple times, your sacred power grew abnormally strong. Not only that, but in the process, you discovered martial arts and worked hard to master them. As a result, although you did participate in the royal exam, fighting was clearly more fun, so you planned to yield the position to your younger sister. Then, for some reason, you fell into the demon realm, met its king, and—sort of ended up marrying him.”

“Right. Back then, he was an irritating guy who swaggered around like a god. Every time he did, I knocked him down. After about two months of that, I thought I should be heading back to the human realm, but he begged me not to go and asked me to marry him.”

Aileen's head hurts. She's having trouble processing this.

“Well, I am a woman. I was old enough to marry, and it sounded entertaining.”

“Entertaining...”

“Oh, erm. Just between us, all right?” Smiling a little awkwardly, Grace lowers her voice. “Frankly, I'd never met a man who was a match for me before. Not only that, but every time I flattened him, he'd come back stronger. I thought, ‘This man has promise.’ I knew I'd found a good one.”

“I...see. Even if he's the demon king?”

“A fine man is a fine man, even if he's the demon king.”

Quite true. Whether he's the demon king or not, Aileen's husband is the finest man in the world.

“As you'd expect from someone who called himself a god, he knew nothing of the wider world. However, when I pointed things out to him, he'd correct himself and learn from his mistakes. When I told him he didn't know how to treat women properly, he did some frantic research, then brought me the loveliest flower in the demon realm. It was beautiful, rather like a lily. No man had ever done that for me before.”

Giggling, Grace hugs her knees, resting her chin on them.

“That’s when it happened: The sacred sword manifested from me.”

“The sacred sword...”

“Her Majesty the Queen had told me in confidence that such a weapon existed; she’d seen it in a prophetic dream. It sure startled me, though. What with this and that, I’d grown fond of the demons, too, and I thought it wouldn’t be bad to look after all of them together. It would double as a way to protect the Queendom of Hausel and defend humans, you see?”

Aileen nods.

“My sister’s a hard worker. She’s an earnest, brilliant girl, a good choice for the next queen. In that case, it’s obviously better for her to be queen than me, since I’m married to the demon king. And so I ended up withdrawing from the royal exam. I thought I’d do what I could do on my own, and I’m planning to found a country. A nation where both humans and demons can live.”

It can’t be— Is that...? Aileen swallows hard.

“So, if a demon is playing pranks on humans, I have to teach it that that’s wrong. My husband—his name is Luciel—is hopeless with that sort of thing. He always defends the demons... And now we’ve ended up causing trouble for you. I’m very sorry.”

“N-no... I see. Yes. Then, in order to get back to where I came from...”

As she’s trying to remember how it worked in the game, Grace tells her, “We just need to break the spell the child is using to keep you here. In a word, it has to grow up. From what I hear, it can only use this ridiculous spell while it’s young. We could ask Luciel to help, but that would mean layering one spell on top of another. If something went wrong, your body might disintegrate and you’d end up as just a soul.”

“By all means, let’s persuade the dragon to grow up. I’m afraid I won’t be much use, but I’ll do what I can.”

“You’re an odd one. Demons don’t scare you?”

“What...? Y-yes, no.”

“Which is it? Heh! Well, never mind. I won’t pry... That’s about all there is to

say about me. Have I gained your trust? If you have any questions, ask away.”

What Aileen would really like to ask about is how the woman met her end. That is what angered the true form. However, that’s still in Grace’s future. Even if she asked, the woman wouldn’t understand.

Still, I’m sure she’s the only person who could quell the true form’s anger.

She’s determined to bring some sort of hint home with her. That has to be why the Holy Dragon Consort shared her magic with her, after all. Aileen thinks and thinks, then looks up with a start. “Of course! Lady Grace, is there a key to building a harmonious marriage?!”

“Will talking about a thing like that earn your trust?”

“It certainly will! Erm, you do fight sometimes, correct? On top of that, your husband is the demon king. I was wondering how one might stop the wrath of the demon king.”

“That’s easy. Just hit him.”

It’s no use; that’s not a hint. Aileen buries her face in her hands, despairing just a little.

Paying absolutely no heed to Aileen, Grace continues in a laidback way, “Other than that, take proper control. It’s handy if you find a weakness to use later, the sort of thing that will make him come running no matter where he is.”

“I...imagine it would be...”

Yes, if I had that, Master Claude might return to me, she thinks, her eyes distant. Then she recollects herself with a jolt. *He’ll come running no matter where he is?*

“U-um, Lady Grace! Were you speaking of Master Luciel when you said—?”

“Well, it’s probably cooled its head by now. Shall we call the dragon?”

Grace takes a palm-sized scale from a cloth bag.

The scale is a lovely pale aqua color, and she’s distracted in spite of herself. “What is that?”

“One of its parents’ scales. I’m told it’s a memento.”

With that, Grace gets to her feet and starts to roast the scale over the fire. Smoke rises lazily from the hill, and Aileen is horrified. “Wha—? L-Lady Grace?! If you do a thing like that—”

“All right, come out! I’m going to burn this!”

“You are?!” Aileen reels.

Grace nods firmly, but not at her. Her eyes are fixed on the distant sky. “Some of the things it stole were probably just as valuable. I have to make it understand how sad it is to lose something like that.”

“Th-that’s very true, but you’re quite harsh, aren’t you!”

“Of course I am: It’s been spoiled for centuries. The other demons are free to defend it, but they’d better be prepared for me to knock them down! The same goes for Luciel! —All right: If you don’t want this burned, come out!”

In the distance, beyond the mountains, a roar goes up. Something like a black mist spreads rapidly across the sky, flying toward them. It’s studded with red things here and there. Are those eyes?

C-come to think of it, that’s the water dragon... So if we make her angry, she becomes the fiend dragon?!

The shape is still a dragon’s, just barely, and it’s rather small, but this is just like what she saw a short while ago in Ashmael. She worries they may have taught her anger, rather than made her understand sadness.

However, Grace snorts and tosses the scale aside. It’s scorched, but to Aileen’s relief, it hasn’t been burned yet. For now, she brushes the soot off, then returns it to the cloth bag.

In the meantime, the fiend dragon has made a beeline for them, and its mouth snaps open. Snatching up Aileen, who still has the bag, Grace launches herself off the hilltop and into the air. “The idea of attacking someone without hearing them out!”

“Wh-what are you going to do?! The dragon is furious!”

“What else is there to do? I’ll strip its scales off and force it to grow up.”

Violence solves everything. With a distant look in her eyes, Aileen decides to

accept that there are times when that's true.

Out of the blue, Amelia's hated sister had returned. Still oblivious of the fact that her younger sister had entrapped her, Grace had become the Maid of the Sacred Sword and married the demon king.

Grace had announced that she was withdrawing from the royal exam, but there was no way everyone would just agree to that.

As the Maid of the Sacred Sword, she was the most suitable candidate for queen. Grace, who had married the demon king, could also be said to have passed the exam: After all, the task had been to teach the god who ruled the demons to love. —Oh, but the subject of the royal exam had been the god who ruled the demons, not the demon king. In any case, the sort of woman who'd marry the demon king couldn't possibly have the real sacred sword, and fleeing had disqualified her from the test... The debate grew chaotic.

Between these voices and the fact that Grace had acquired the sacred sword, even the queen, who had prophesied that Amelia was fit to succeed her, grew flustered.

Grace completely ignored the commotion around her, and she really did leave everything behind. Saying something incomprehensible about building a country where demons and humans could live together, she disappeared again.

Someone who wasn't there couldn't be crowned queen.

Left with no alternative, the royal exam continued. It was drawn out in the thinly veiled hope that Grace might show herself again or decide to become queen after all.

“—‘I have to acquire the sacred sword, no matter what.’ ‘I must seek out the god of demons.’ ...Phrases like those show up a lot after Grace returns.” Paging through Amelia's journal, Cedric exhales wearily.

Marcus frowns. “You should rest.”

“I'm fine. The content is just getting to me a bit.”

Cedric has a brilliant older brother, and apparently he's seeing himself in this. Still clinging to his arm, Lilia steals a glance at the wrinkles that have formed

between his eyebrows. *Come to think of it, has he conquered that inferiority complex of his?*

In the game, Claude became the demon king and strayed from the path without any encouragement, and so Cedric had managed to conquer his complex with nothing more than acceptance from Lilia. As things stand, though, his brilliant half brother has retaken the position of crown prince, and Cedric has chosen to submit to him...against Lilia's wishes.

"? What's the matter, Lilia?"

Without meaning to, she's squeezed his arm tighter, but she doesn't get flustered. Slowly, she puts on a concerned expression. "I'm worried about you, Cedric."

"...Ah. I'm all right." Cedric gives her a hollow smile. He doesn't believe a word of what she said. She wasn't sincere, of course, but it irks her a little.

"I mean it. You should rest, even if it's just for a few minutes."

"No, let's get this over with. Hausel's time limit is coming up fast. If Aileen's missing, then it's even more important that we do what we can."

She's curious about the journal, so she doesn't actually want him to rest, but she doesn't like the way he keeps ignoring her suggestions. It's too late to drop her act, though. "I see... Take care not to push yourself."

"Right. This is...less than two weeks after Grace's temporary return. People suspect that Luciel may be a demon, and they've decided to drag him in front of a mirror of truth."

That's the event where it becomes clear that Luciel is the demon king, the god who rules the demons.

When Luciel's true form is exposed, if Amelia's holy power isn't strong enough—in other words, if her game parameters aren't high enough—he'll kill her and end the game. If they are high enough, the game branches into the Queen route and the Maid of the Sacred Sword route, depending on whether the sacred sword appears.

If Luciel's affection is high enough, when his true form is exposed and he flees,

he'll drop a flower that will make Amelia's sacred sword manifest. If it isn't high enough, he won't drop the flower, so she'll enter the Queen route instead of becoming the Maid of the Sacred Sword.

But Grace has already romanced Luciel. What will happen in that case?

Slowly, Cedric reveals the answer.

"Amelia seems determined to protect Luciel, even if he proves to be a demon. While he was being held captive, she told him, 'I'll fix this somehow, so run away.' Luciel told her he'd be all right, but... Although she doesn't describe it in detail, she seems to have come up with a concrete plan to let him escape."

"Wait just a minute. She was a royal candidate. Wasn't that a really bad idea?" Serena frowns.

Cedric nods. "Yes—it would be. However, she says, 'Even so. He always encouraged me, saying that I could be queen, not Grace. In this alone, I will not hesitate.'"

"...Stupid woman."

"Serena?"

Serena has turned her back on them, and Auguste goes over to her. Her quiet murmur echoes quite loudly in the hushed room. "Luciel was her sister's husband. She didn't even know."

"Oh..."

Auguste's startled murmur probably speaks for every man in the room.

Exactly: Amelia had unwittingly been in love with her brother-in-law. She may not even have realized that what she felt was love, but...

Cedric draws a deep breath, then continues reading, describing the foolish end of a foolish woman.

"On that day, before Luciel was dragged before the mirror of truth, Grace appeared."

Not surprising. If her husband hadn't come home, she would have gone looking for him.

“When the situation was explained to her, Grace simply told them that Luciel was both the demon king and the god who ruled the demons. She also said that he was her husband, so there was no need to worry.”

Amelia had wanted to become queen badly enough to fatally sabotage her older sister, and yet she’d been prepared to discard her chance at the throne in order to let Luciel escape. How must she have felt when she’d heard Grace’s statement?

“Luciel declared that he had no intention of attacking. He thanked Amelia, the only one who’d tried to protect him, and gave her a flower. It was the loveliest flower that grew in the demon realm. ‘Because you are my precious sister-in-law,’ he told her. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I was the demon king. I thought you might hate me if you knew.’”

The power of love made that flower bloom. Its existence led to the birth of the sacred sword.

“In her journal entry for that night, she writes...‘I don’t know anymore.’”

“Read it just as it is, Cedric,” Lilia urges him quietly.

Cedric nods. “—‘Why am I crying so much? It can’t be because he called me his sister-in-law, can it? No, it couldn’t be that. It’s because I was used. That’s the only reason. Yes, those two used me. And they call themselves my family! They intended to keep quiet and use me once I became queen. I should be angry; there’s no need for tears, and yet... That’s right; I should rejoice. After all, I’ve obtained the sacred sword at last...’ The sacred sword, appearing now?!”

“The greatest condition for becoming the Maid of the Sacred Sword is love, you know. Love for family will do...and even a broken heart is love.”

That means Amelia Dark was a genuine Maid of the Sacred Sword.

“So what happened then? The royal exam wasn’t over yet.”

“Oh, um... Because she had obtained the sacred sword and Luciel had acknowledged her as family, they ruled that she had taught the god who ruled the demons about familial love. It was decided the very next day that she would become queen.”

That must have been humiliating for her as well, but her pride wouldn't allow her to admit it. Amelia would become queen in order to exult in her victory, telling herself that she'd won, that she'd used those two.

Then, upon inheriting the power to see the past and predict the future in the subterranean shrine, she would learn the truth.

The one Luciel had been destined to marry was Amelia Dark.

That realization would spark a new tragedy.

The next thing Aileen knows, she's floating in the sky, protected by a transparent conical barrier.

"Wait there a minute," Grace says, sounding just like Claude. She's drawn the sword she wears at her waist. It isn't the sacred sword.

Even so, it's dripping with bright particles of sacred power. Grace traces a sharp line with her blade, poised to strike, before slamming the sword into the charging fiend dragon.

This baptism of light blows the fiend dragon's miasma away, but the dragon doesn't shrink back. It charges straight at Grace, and the woman evades it with an agile spin. Then, incredibly, she grabs the dragon's long neck and throws it.

Lofted with startling ease, the fiend dragon soars right past Aileen, then manages to collect itself with a roar.

Grace turns, eyes narrowed. "...You had better not be planning to take that young woman hostage."

"What? Oh."

At that point, Aileen realizes the dragon is behind her, using her as a shield.

She turns to look at it. The fiend dragon is quite a bit smaller than the Holy Dragon Consort. Its miasma was what had made it look big, and Grace's attack has thinned that considerably.

"I don't think much of cowardly moves like that."

"Growrrr..."

"If you drag the young lady into this, I'll show you no mercy." Grace is

watching them, one hand braced on her hip. Her voice is low. “Get away from her.”

“Growr!”

“Don’t be spoiled. I am the wife of the demon king. That makes me your mother figure. I can’t let you do as you please when I know you’re wrong.”

“Y-you can understand her, Lady Grace?”

“Of course I can’t. This is instinct!”

In other words, she doesn’t know. However, she’s probably not entirely wrong.

The fiend dragon glares back at Grace, growling deep in her throat. The way she’s breathing makes it clear she’s agitated. Her nostrils flare impatiently, and every so often, she beats her wings.

However, she doesn’t attempt to attack Aileen.

Oh.

After the incident in Ashmael, she knows this is not a demon to be trifled with. At heart, though, the dragon is terribly shy and timid.

The fiend dragon’s irritation seems to have reached its limit, and she roars. Perhaps because she doesn’t have good control of her magic, the space around her warps, dragging both Aileen and the barrier toward her.

Grace has sheathed her blade, and now her palm glows. It’s the sacred sword.

In the next moment, she’s right in front of the fiend dragon, boxing it in with strokes from her blade. The strokes spread out like ropes, then wrap around the dragon from head to toe.

“Growr-growr-growr!”

The dragon struggles to break free, growing more and more agitated. Magic explodes around her like fireworks.

The light and sound echo inside the barrier. Aileen squeezes her eyes shut, and her hands come up to cover her ears.

When Grace sees that, she gets angry.

“As I keep telling you, do not drag other people into this! I really will strip off those scales of yours!”

“Growr! Growr!”

“You unreasonable little—!”

“W-wait, Lady Grace! The dragon does understand!”

The fiend dragon freezes. For the first time, she looks down at Aileen.

Grace, who’s come up beside her, frowns. “If it understands, then why...?”

“She’s uneasy. You do understand that you’re causing trouble for other people, don’t you?”

The dragon gives a low moan. Her eyes are still filled with distrust, but she keeps them fixed on Aileen.

Having caught her breath, Aileen rises to her feet, looking up into the dragon’s face. The barrier supports her properly.

“You understand that you must grow up. You’re quite clever, after all. You don’t think there’s anything good about maturing, though. After all, as a high-level demon, everyone’s bound to be afraid of you once you’re grown. Even though you have no family or companions as it is.”

“.....”

“If you become an adult, you may end up truly alone. In that case, since this power won’t be yours forever, you want to use it to gather mementos of your companions now. That’s perfectly natural.”

Grace blinks, then sighs. The sacred sword vanishes from her hand, and the ropes of light that bind the fiend dragon disappear. “You know you’re not alone in the world. When you grow up, you’ll still be you.”

“Growr...”

“Besides, no matter how strong you get, I bet you’ll be weaker than I am.”

Aileen gets the feeling that they’ve drifted off-topic a bit, but Grace gently approaches the dragon and pats her on the head. “Silly child. That’s right, though. I’ve only been telling you that you need to grow up; I haven’t told you

how splendid it will be. Still, the benefits of becoming an adult... Hmm. I can't really think of any."

"Ngrowr?!"

"Lady Grace! Erm, let's see. You're a girl, aren't you?!"

"Is it?"

What, she didn't know? She slumps but finds herself laughing. *This oddly foolish side is just like Master Claude.* He also tries to resolve issues with brute strength, and while he appears to listen to what people say, he doesn't. Remembering makes affection well up inside her.

For that reason, there's something Aileen can tell this child, whom she'll meet again someday.

"Listen. When you grow up, you'll become a splendid woman."

"Gurowr...?"

"And then—you'll be able to marry the one you love, you see?"

The fiend dragon— Or rather, the small dragon has nearly returned to normal, her miasma all but gone. She perks up her whiskers.

Aileen gives her a mischievous smile. "I know all about it. You'll meet a fine man, and you'll learn what love is."

A little shiver runs through the young dragon.

"That man will make you his queen. Do you understand? That means his bride."

"Wait, are you talking about a human? He's going to marry this kid? ... Whoever he is, he's got guts. Is he strong?"

"Yes. Strong enough to rival the demon king. The demon king would never let her marry someone who wasn't a proper partner, would he?"

"No, he certainly wouldn't. When it comes to the demons, he's overprotective."

The young dragon is listening in, fidgeting restlessly.

“You’ll marry that splendid man, and he’ll give you a marvelous name. A name that’s yours alone.”

A strong shudder runs all through the young dragon, and then something light falls away from her.

Grace has come up beside Aileen, and she murmurs, “...Scales. Is that how they come off?”

“What? You mean...”

“She’s growing up.”

The gleaming scales fall, like stardust on a desert night.

At the same time, the conical barrier vanishes, and Grace catches her. “I never thought things would be settled so easily.”

“She may be a dragon, but she’s still a girl. No doubt the future holds all sorts of things, but dreams are important.”

“Thank you. That was a great help.” The woman’s eyes are sincere.

Aileen simply nods.

“When it comes to being the demon king’s wife, I still have a lot to learn. I thank you, both personally and on Luciel’s behalf.”

“Oh no, that’s— Of course, Master Luciel! Lady Grace, would you tell me how to make him come running no matter where he is?!”

“? I don’t mind, but...” Grace looks mystified.

Aileen engraves what the other woman tells her firmly on her heart. She needs to be sure she won’t forget it, dreamlike, once she returns.

At that point, she realizes that her toes seem to be fading.

Grace has seen it, too, and she smiles. “The spell is lifting. It’s time we said goodbye, although I rather wish it weren’t.”

“Y-yes.”

“If we ever meet again, I’ll be the one to help you.”

“Um, Lady Grace! I’m—” She isn’t sure what she wants to say, and she falters.

Grace gives a troubled smile. “What is it? Why would you look like that, when you finally get to go home?”

It must be because Grace’s speech and gestures are identical to Claude’s.

Her beloved, whom she must go to war to reclaim.

Will she manage to take him back on her own? Can she fight to the finish without the sacred sword?

“There’s no need for tears. You’ll be all right. There’s nothing you can’t accomplish.”

“U-um, but I...”

“Even if you’re uneasy, hold your head high. You are also a demon king’s wife, aren’t you?”

Aileen gasps and reaches out, but her hand has nearly faded away.

“I wonder when you’re from. Take good care of my son, please.”

“I—I will, Mother.”

“I like the sound of that... Go on. I’m sure he’s waiting for you,” the woman says firmly.

Then she vanishes into the magic, the light, the past.

When she opens her eyes, she sees her former fiancé, whom she’d really have preferred never to see again. In addition, preposterously, she’s on his lap.

The unbelievable reality makes Aileen scream. “I was with a truly wonderful person just a moment ago, and on my return, I’m met by the face of the most wretched man in the world! What kind of harassment is this supposed to be?!”

“Look, for quite a while now, you’ve been— Also, that’s my line. Get off! Y—you just appeared out of thin air; I thought my heart would stop!”

“I wish it had.”

“Lady Aileen!”

Lilia lunges in to hug her, and they tumble onto the bed together. At that point, for the first time, she notices that they’re in Cedric’s bedchamber.

Even lying on her back, she manages to move her head enough to register that an unusual group of people—Serena, Marcus, James, and Auguste—are watching her with dazed expressions.

While Aileen is trying unsuccessfully to get a handle on the situation, Lilia straddles her. “Honestly! First you disappear without warning, then you pop up out of nowhere! Come on, tell me, how was it?! How, how, how, how?! Tell me tell me tell me tell me tell me tell me!”

“D-don’t, don’t shake me. I’ll choke!”

“It was the Game 4 Time Dragon event, wasn’t it?!”

As always, her understanding of the game is profound. *Tsking*, Aileen smacks Lilia’s hands away—the woman was nearly strangling her—and sits up. “You can’t think I’d blab about it to you.”

“Huh? Fine, I’ll just tear this up.”

Lilia opens Amelia Dark’s journal right in front of her, then begins to pull on both sides.

Aileen immediately reaches for it, but the girl whisks it up out of her reach. After they’ve repeated this dance a few times, with Aileen trying to take the book and Lilia dodging, Aileen lashes out furiously. “Who was it?! Who told this woman about the journal?!”

“That would be me. It’s your fault for vanishing like that, and you know it.”

“I had Cedric read us the whoooooole thing.” Lilia gives a pointed little chuckle.

Aileen sighs. “I see. And? You can’t be proposing that we exchange information.”

“Goodness, Lady Aileen. You aren’t startled that Cedric could read it?”

“We had lessons together. That means I can read it, too!” She makes another grab for the journal, but it bobs out of reach again. *I swear, this woman...* She glares at her, but Lilia’s looking back at her, and Aileen notices that Lilia’s eyes are oddly subdued. This is her genuine expression.

Hmm? What? What’s this reaction about?

However, the other girl's lips promptly curve into a smile, and she leans in until her nose is almost touching Aileen's. "Amelia is queen, even though she has the sacred sword. She'd entered the Maid of the Sacred Sword route, but Grace took the hero from her and twisted things into the Queen ending. That's my interpretation. How does it sound?"

"...No objections. And? Does it say what she did after becoming queen?"

In response, Lilia holds the journal out to her.

It contains the final moments of the previous demon king's wife as well as hope for the future Aileen is about to make her way through.

The date has changed.

Now we have five days until the Queendom of Hausel's deadline.

Looking up at a dark sky filled with twinkling stars, Aileen adjusts her dressing gown. The breath she exhales doesn't mist white yet, but no doubt it's only a matter of time.

The courtyard of the old castle is deserted. Walt and Kyle offered to be her guards, of course, or at least to accompany her. So did James, Auguste, and even Marcus and Lester. She turned them all down.

There are no demons here, either. She's all alone. She'd thought it would be best this way.

Drawing a deep breath, she speaks calmly.

"Father... You can hear me, can't you?"

The only response is a faint, rustling wind.

Even so, she's sure he's listening. The old castle's barrier is still there.

"I met Mother, and she taught me something quite useful: a magic spell that will make Master Luciel come running, no matter where he is or what he may be doing."

The trees sway in the wind, seeming bewildered. Since he's been separated from the true form, Luciel says he doesn't have the power to influence the natural world the way Claude does, but the waiting silence feels like a reply.

“Father, on your wedding night, you were so nervous that—”

“Aah-aah-aah-aah-aah-aah! Wh-wha...what are you talking about?!”

Luciel really has appeared, just like that.

So he was eavesdropping? Aileen thinks, feeling a little disgusted. She crosses her arms. “Well, at least it saved us the trouble of finding you... But you really did come running.”

“Ngh... I-if you talk to me like that, I’ll disappear again!”

“Be my guest. In exchange, I’ll continue. Confused about what to do, Father, you—”

“Aaah-aaah-aaah-aaah, I can’t heaaaar yooooou! What are you anyway?! Where did you get that information?! It’s one of the demon realm’s top secrets! The demons would die before they let it slip!”

“As I said, Mother told me herself.”

Luciel starts to say something, then turns away, sulking. “There’s no way I could believe that. You’re starting to make me think it just might be true, though. That’s a problem.”

“How are your injuries? Are you eating properly? Have you been sleeping?”

“Huh? Where’s this coming from? Don’t tell me you summoned me to ask about that.”

“No, I didn’t, but... The idea that Mother may be worried concerns me. It feels like my duty as her daughter-in-law.” Aileen puts a hand to her cheek, sighing. “She only asked me to take care of Master Claude, and yet...”

“I get that you aren’t doing this for me, at least.”

“However, you do know about our situation, correct? I believe you know why I’ve summoned you.”

“The one about taking me to that woman? Sorry, but I haven’t fallen so low I’d let humans take advantage of me.” Luciel smiles at her sardonically.

Without letting her own smile falter, Aileen makes a proposal. “Then would you join us in mounting an offensive on Hausel?”

“You still haven’t given up? Claude’s gone all— And you’ve even lost the sacred sword.”

“Mother is a marvelous person, isn’t she? She told me, ‘It’s all right. My son is waiting for you,’ and made me feel as if it were true.” She throws her shoulders back proudly.

Luciel stares. Then he breaks into a wry smile. “You’re actually... If I had to say, I think you’re more like me.”

“Gracious. How, exactly?”

“The truth is you’re scared, and you’d rather run, but giving up is the last thing you can do. You want it all, so you’ll keep struggling even if it’s liable to destroy the world. That part.”

“And what’s wrong with that?”

“Even the way you get defiant about it is identical.”

His eyes seem to say that he gets it. He’s looking at himself through Aileen.

Aileen doesn’t reply. She looks down briefly, then gazes straight back at him. “In that case, Father, help me. Let us save Master Claude.”

“Claude is...”

“And after that, let’s all go in search of Mother.”

Luciel’s eyes widen.

“I think your desire to save Master Claude is genuine. However, that isn’t what you want to do most. Your greatest wish is the same as the true form’s.”

I want to see you one more time.

“...It can’t be done.”

“That isn’t true.”

“The true form is just dreaming. She’s nowhere now. I’ll never see her again.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Because I couldn’t protect her!” Luciel yells, scattering tears. Covering his face with a hand, he backs away, his expression twisting like a child’s. “I’m a

god, but I couldn't save her. All I could do was break everything. Even though she'd left it all in my care! She was the true Maid of the Sacred Sword, but they called her the Maid of the Cursed Sword and despised her, and I couldn't stop them. If she hadn't met me, if she hadn't married the demon king, she would have been so much happier in so many, many ways!"

She'd always thought it was strange. Claude's destined lover possessed the soul of Luciel's beloved wife. Even if her form had changed, he must want to see her, and yet he'd never tried to find her. He'd always hung back. Why was that?

Luciel's scream holds the sad answer to that question. Regrets that are nothing but pain. A hopeless past.

"I was the only one who was happy. I knew it, but I couldn't let her go. I still can't call her name, and yet I even sacrificed our son to— I could never show my face to her!"

"But you still want to see her."

Luciel's face crumples. He looks as if he's about to cry, but there's a scornful smile on his face. He seems to be crying out that his love for her had been a mistake.

Slowly, Aileen reaches out and touches his hand. It's cold.

Aileen's sure she can't warm that hand. Even so, she grasps it and speaks firmly. "It's all right, Father. The things you're saying simply mean that, as a woman, she couldn't have felt more blessed."

There's a moment's delay, and then Luciel looks up.

"After all, it's wonderful. A lover who pursues you, driven by his desire to see you, even if it means destroying the world— That would soften any woman's heart."

"Is...is that how it works?"

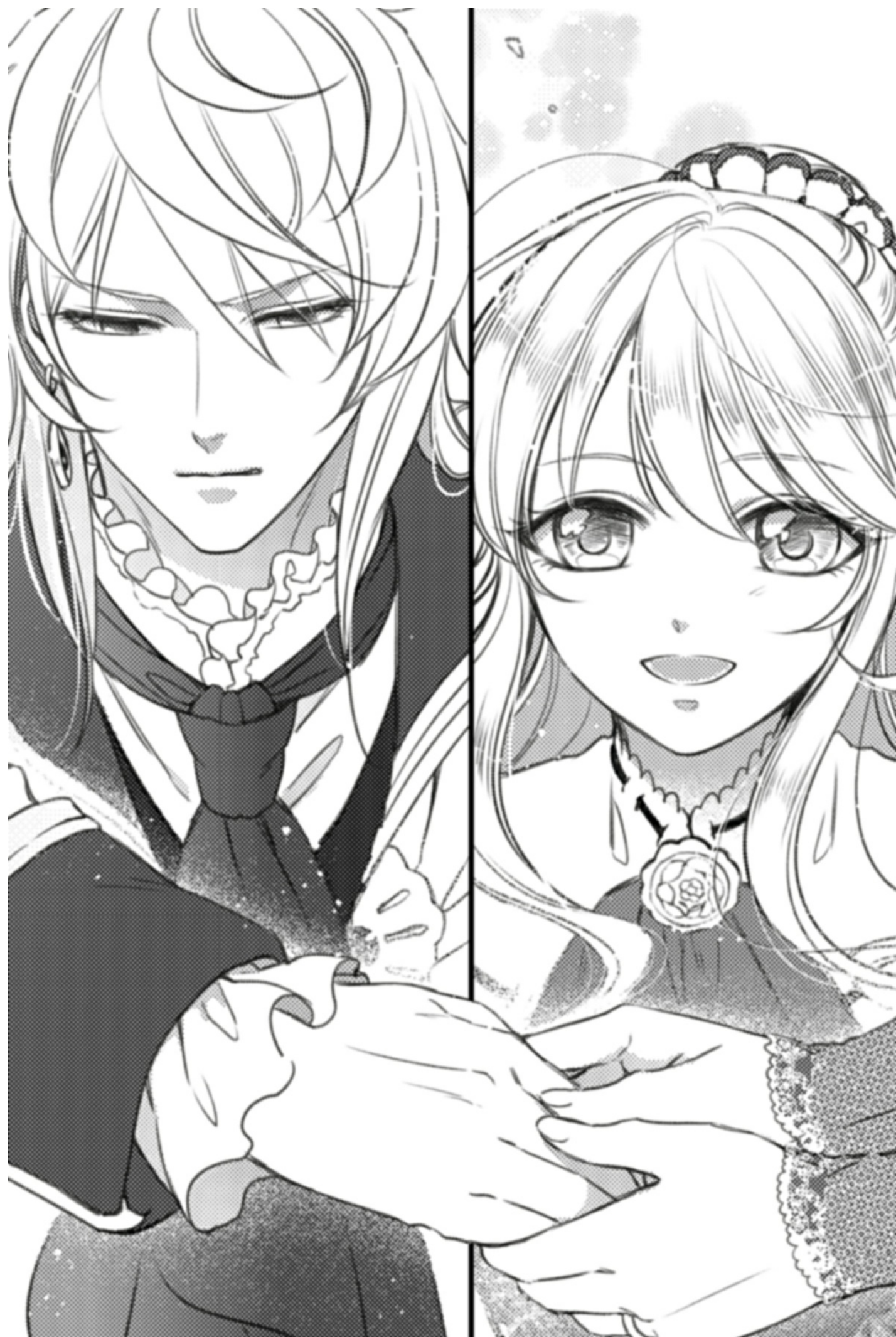
"And so I believe you should see Mother again and let her thrash you within an inch of your life."

"That doesn't sound like a softened heart to me!"

"They're two different matters."

Luciel's brow is furrowed; he's looking at her as if he doesn't understand any of this. It's funny, and she laughs in spite of herself.

Luciel's frown deepens. "Are you teasing me?"



“Perish the thought. —Let’s save Master Claude and win her forgiveness, shall we? I’ll defend you. Besides, Father. You may be a god, but assuming everything is your fault is simply arrogance.”

Luciel’s red eyes widen.

Aileen looks down, slowly transmuting her feelings into words, as if persuading herself of them. “Certainly, the fact that Master Claude has changed so dramatically may be partly your fault. However, he is the one who chose to destroy himself. That means part of the responsibility is his.”

“That’s not—!”

“Refrain from insulting my husband like that, if you please.” Aileen looks up, her face dignified, and Luciel gulps. “Master Claude is not so weak that he would flee from his own choices. He is an adult who is capable of taking responsibility for his own words and actions. —He said he would return.” Squeezing her trembling hands into fists, she faces forward. “I believe him. I trust that Master Claude will return to me.”

“...But Claude’s no longer—”

“The same goes for Mother. When she left for the Queendom by herself, didn’t she tell you she would return to you?”

Grace really had built a new country where demons and humans could live together. She’d attempted to make the demon king its emperor— No, she’d actually done it. However, even if she bore the name of the Maid of the Sacred Sword, she hadn’t won recognition easily. There was also the fact that Amelia, the queen of Hausel, had become a Maid of the Sacred Sword as well. People wondered whether she’d been brainwashed by the demon king, whether she’d stolen the sacred sword from Amelia and was actually the Maid of the Cursed Sword. They slandered her and kept getting in her way.

At that point, Amelia had extended a helping hand. Acknowledgment from the Queendom of Hausel would make many things easier, and Grace gratefully accepted her invitation.

She hadn’t realized that, after learning of her “proper destiny,” her twin sister had secretly orchestrated the whole affair and was about to add the finishing

touch.

Father doesn't need to know this. It's better if he never finds out.

Why had the sister-in-law he'd trusted beheaded his wife? Why had things gotten so twisted and ugly? Learning the reason this long after the fact won't benefit anyone. Even Amelia doesn't want that.

After all, even though she did all that, Father isn't seeking revenge. He only wants to see Mother.

What a cruel love. Far past saving, with nowhere to go.

Aileen does sympathize on a certain level. However, she mustn't accept it.

Both Aileen and Luciel have loves they can't concede.

"I'm certain Mother still exists somewhere."

"Wha...what makes you so sure?"

"Those were the words of the woman you chose as your wife, weren't they? Believe them.

—Master Claude will return, without fail. After all, he said he would!"

Believe in me. I'll come back home. If the ones they love have told them so...

"If even you and I don't believe them, what use are we?!"

Luciel's red eyes waver. His long, tear-soaked lashes rise and fall. He looks ready to burst into tears again. "E-even after...she died...like that?"

"Yes."

"Sh-she was reduced to a severed head. Killed by the sister she'd believed in. Even so?"

"Yes, even so."

"The fact that she met me..."

He's probably too scared to finish that question. He can't get the words out, and Aileen completes the thought for him.

"She doesn't regret it. You know better than anyone that she isn't that sort of person."

Luciel's face finally crumples. He looks like a small child. The god falls to his knees, sobbing out loud, and she gently puts her arms around him.

I miss you. This time, she prays that his devoted love will become a benevolent spell that will save everyone.

Large drops of water fall onto the backs of his hands, which hold a knife and fork.

"B-Beelzebuth?! Almond, too..."

They're tears. They spill over, and Rachel rises to her feet and hastily wipes them away. Around the table, the other humans look flustered.

"Huh? What? Did you get hurt?!"

"I won your dessert in that rock-paper-scissors match, but— Did you want it that badly?! Here, you can have it back." Denis holds the plate out, and Beelzebuth takes it without hesitating. "...He's crying," he mutters.

"Master is sad...", Almond says as Rachel scrubs his tears away.

"Do you mean Master Luciel?" Elefas asks. The mage has been watching them quietly. When he nods, big tears spill over again, and Rachel hands him a clean cloth.

"We must...save him...this time."

"Find Lady Grace! Make Master happy!"

"H-hey, uh, Elefas? Isn't this place isolated now...?"

"We aren't inside a barrier of sacred power, though. If we compare sacred power to water, our location is a bit like an air bubble. Things below the level of magic may get through."

"Eat, humans. Then we fight." Tears still streaming down his face, Beelzebuth tightens his grip on his fork. When they took refuge in the kitchen, they found provisions, and Rachel used them to make a pasta-based meal. Now Beelzebuth stuffs his mouth with it.

Almond looks up at Rachel sharply. "Are cookies ready?!"

"N-not yet. Just a little longer."

“Precious food! I take them and go outside!”

“Whoa, nuh-uh. Go outside? Those soldiers that are white all over have us surrounded in a big way.”

“It’s all right. They show no signs of coming in. Let’s eat properly, rest, and get ready. In battle, eighty percent of the outcome is determined by how well you’ve prepared.”

“Um, Bel? I’ll make a superstrong weapon, okay?” Denis promises. Even though he always smiles cheerfully, his expression is sober now. Beelzebuth nods. There’s no room for doubt.

“Bel, I bet you’ll be able to stay at Luciel’s side far longer than I will.”

He tears off a bite of bread, then chews.

“So please. Don’t let Luciel, or the demon kings after him, be lonely.”

“You seem to be thinking hard, and I was impressed. Keep that up and learn all sorts of things.”

Both Grace and Aileen were constantly trying to entrust Beelzebuth with things. He doesn’t understand it, but it’s probably inevitable. He is the king’s right-hand man: It’s only natural that they’d rely on him.

This time, he won’t simply serve a king who falls into despair, hugging his wife’s severed head.

He’s going to save him. Just as the women who’ve loved that king have done.

And so, sire. Please...

Come back. Become the person they loved once more.

◆ Ninth Act ◆

The Villainess's Lackeys Suffer Hardship

“My. Good morning.” Finding himself greeted before he can say anything, Walt’s about to tease Aileen for not still being in bed this morning when he freezes up. Kyle, who’s come along to keep an eye on him, follows his gaze and goes very still as well.

The crown prince and princess have bedchambers in both the imperial castle and the old castle. This was originally Claude’s room, and only the bed has been changed, but it’s still a married couple’s bedroom.

Why on earth is a man other than her husband—even if he is her father-in-law—sleeping there blissfully?

“...This can’t be good.”

“N-no...”

“Don’t wake Master Luciel.”

Aileen may or may not have picked up on her guards’ worry. She’s sitting at a little table near the balcony, paging through documents in the morning sunlight. Should they simply be grateful that they didn’t see her asleep on the bed with him?

Walt darts a sidelong glance at Kyle, who nods back.

He’d prefer to pretend he hadn’t seen it. However, this is their only chance to deal with the situation before Claude finds out. With this sort of thing, the longer they leave it, the more damage they’ll take.

“Um. Sweet Ailey? Why is Master Luciel here, hmm?”

“And actually, you found him...”

“Yes. I’ve convinced him to cooperate. We don’t know how far he’ll be able to mobilize the demons, but now we can plan our operation in earnest.”

“Th-that’s good, but, erm...”

“Did you sleep with him?”

“Kyle! How can you be so blunt?!”

Aileen lets the documents fall with a soft rustle. Resting her chin in her hand, she turns to them. “How rude. Do I look that unfaithful?”

He wouldn’t put it past her, but if he’s honest about that, she’s likely to send him flying. “Oh, you know, just asking.”

“I’m told that this room was Master Luciel and Lady Grace’s bedchamber long ago.”

Before the current imperial castle was built, this had been the main castle. It was remodeled, but its general structure hasn’t changed much. In particular, owing to considerations of both authority and security, it isn’t easy to change the location of the rooms where the noblest personage lives.

“And so I conceded it to him. I’m sure it will help him relax. I have a room in the imperial castle as well, so I intend to have him stay here for the present.”

“Ah... Yes, well, in that case, it should squeak by.”

“...Right.”

Claude probably won’t be angry. Probably. Relieved, Walt and Kyle exchange nods. Just then, something stirs under the sheets, and Luciel pokes his sleepy head out. “Nn... Morning...?”

“You may sleep longer if you wish, Father.”

Luciel rolls across the bed toward Aileen. “I’m hungry, so I’ll get uuup... Aileen, I want a sandwich of sweet, scrambled eggs and crispy bacon. Also some milk with honey.”

“That’s so picky!”

“Way back when, my wife told me to make my instructions speciifiic.”

“She was right to say that, but even so! ...All right, I’ll have those prepared for you.”

“Nooo. You make them, Aileeeen. Somebody might poison meeee.”

Rolling around, Luciel whines.

I'd like to knock him out right now, he thinks. Possibly as a result, his inner voice escapes him.

"If he's not a lackey, I think it would be okay..."

"No, I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be!"

"Like Master Claude, poisons don't work on you, Father. Don't be difficult. I'm busy."

"Ohhh, my daughter-in-law is cold! That's so sad... I might be handed over to the Queendom of Hausel and die, you know. All I want is for my sweet daughter-in-law to cook me one final meal..."

"Honestly, how irritating...! I'll make it, all right?! Are you happy now?!"

Rising to her feet and smacking the table, Aileen leaves the room; she's quivering with anger. She may not sound like it, but she's good at looking after others. When she glances at him, Kyle follows her unsteadily. He's turned pale, but he hasn't forgotten his job.

For the moment, Walt is relieved that he won't be forced to see something that's bad for his heart. In front of him, finally, Luciel sits up.

When he darts a furtive glance at his profile, the man smiles as if he's seen right through him. "Daughter-in-laws are great, aren't they."

"Um, mm-hmm... But if you get too carried away, Master Claude might...you know."

"Maybe he'll get mad and challenge his dad to a match! Well, nothing wrong with that. They say that when men kill their fathers, it's proof that they've grown up."

Getting out of bed, Luciel opens the balcony doors and stretches. His silver hair shimmers, catching the morning sun.

"...I had a daughter, too. I remember now. She was still just a baby. My son was already walking... I wonder what happened to them. Did I kill them?" He leans back against the balustrade, gazing into the distance. *What are those red eyes seeing?* "I don't even know that. As a father, I'm a real failure."

"I think he survived and became the emperor of Ellmeyer," Walt says firmly.

Those eyes tick over to him. They won't tolerate careless lip service or deceit.

Feeling just a little nervous, Walt goes on, "His bloodline continued. That's why Master Claude, from the imperial family, became the demon king, and why Lady Aileen, a duke's daughter, had the potential to possess the sacred sword."

Those two were born because the blood of the demon king and the Maid of the Sacred Sword had mingled. That's what Walt thinks anyway.

"Claude really has been blessed with good people." Luciel's tone and expression soften.

The demon king and former master of this castle tips his head back to look at the sky. Then he gazes straight at Walt. "Keep that up. Take care of my son... I can't protect him any longer."

Asking what he means seems as if it would be boorish, so Walt simply bows his head.

On the shelf, the dose of pain medicine remains untouched. Luc pulls a little chair over to the bed and takes a seat. "Does it still hurt anywhere? What about your fever?"

"I'm fine, thanks to you," the man says. He stirs and immediately grimaces. He's obviously lying. "Never mind me. How's Sahra?"

He glances over at a folding screen. His wife lies on the other side of it. This patient, a general from a foreign country, is still waiting for her to wake up.

"She hasn't regained consciousness. Her coma is so deep that there's no way to treat it."

"....."

"She should be fine. Serena says she's sharing power with her," Auguste says brusquely. He's been given full responsibility for guarding this room.

"How 'fine' is that exactly? Will she be like this forever?"

"How should I know? Don't ask me."

"Of all the irresponsible—!"

"Irresponsible? In that case, hurry up and get out of here. I dunno where you

plan to go, though.”

Auguste gives the man a mocking smile; even though being friendly is his default, he’s ruthless to General Ares. Ares flares up and seems about to snap at him, but then he bites his lip and looks down.

Sighing at the prickly atmosphere, Luc changes the subject. “Could we talk about your left leg now?”

“...Yes. I assume I won’t walk again.”

“The implanted sacred stones have fused with your nerves and muscles. At this point, I don’t think even Lady Sahra could heal that leg. The Daughter of God’s power could probably restore the sacred stones to their original state, but it can’t destroy them. Even if we did destroy the stones, extracting them from your leg would effectively be amputating it.”

In terms of his work as a holy general, having a lame leg will be fatal. Ares’s weak smile seems almost self-deprecating. “—I see. So now I’m a complete burden.”

“However, there is one way your leg might move again.”

Ares looks at him, his brow furrowed.

“The holy king. He may be able to grant new power to the sacred stones in your leg, converting them into a mechanism which could help you walk.”

“Master Baal could...?”

“It’s just a conjecture, but there’s a good possibility.”

“Couldn’t he wake Sahra, then?! Ghk...!” An attempt to lean forward leaves Ares wincing.

Luc shrugs. “I knew it. It does still hurt. You’re feverish, too.”

“I don’t care about that! Send Sahra back to Ashmael, right this mi—!”

“In a situation like this? You know it can’t be done. The holy king has a kingdom to defend.”

“Master Baal loves Sahra! I’m sure he’d—”

“Would you knock it off?! How selfish can you get!” Auguste stalks over and

hauls Ares up by his shirtfront. “You’re seriously considering relying on the holy king? Did you forget what you did?! You stole his wife, fobbed off your own discarded fiancée on him, and now you want him to help you?!”

“Th-that was—”

“I bet you don’t even remember me! I haven’t forgotten what you did to Serena, though—”

“Okay, quiet down.”

Luc jabs a syringe into Auguste’s arm. About three seconds later, Auguste sinks to his knees. While he’s at it, Luc tosses pain medication, a fever reducer, and some water into Ares’s mouth, then covers it and holds his nose. Ares’s eyes roll in consternation; he struggles, but he is wounded.

“Nnnnnnnnn...nnnnnnnnnn!”

“Listen up: When your doctor tells you to do things, you should pay attention. Okay, good, you swallowed.”

“L-Luc, what...did you...?”

“It’s fine. You’ll be back to normal in half an hour or so, probably.”

“Probably?!”

“Clean out your ears and listen to me. I have absolutely nothing to do with your feud, so don’t get in the way of my work. My job is to nurse you, Ares, back to health as best I can. That goes for your wife as well.”

Ares is choking and coughing; he’s swallowed all the medicine. He looks up at him with tear-filled eyes. “Th-then...”

“However, under the circumstances, we can’t ask the Kingdom of Ashmael for anything. With that left leg of yours, you couldn’t even carry your wife back to Ashmael. Even if you could, she’d be dead of malnutrition by the time you arrived. As a medical professional, I hate to admit it, but the fact that she’s only sleeping and not worse is due to some mysterious power I don’t understand.”

Packing his tools and a variety of medicines into his bag, Luc gets to his feet. “In order to save your wife, you’ll need to borrow power from others. Is that clear?”

“.....”

“However, it doesn’t look as though anyone will try to help you. I don’t know what happened, but it’s probably a result of how you’ve lived until now. You could say you brought it on yourself. I have no way to treat that, and there’s no medicine for it, so do something about it yourself.”

“Never mind me.” Ares has finally caught his breath, and he murmurs quietly, “I don’t need anything. I just want to save Sahra.”

“And I’m telling you that’s selfish!”

He’d given Auguste a fairly strong tranquilizer, but he’s still trying to yell. He’s tough.

Luc sighs heavily. This isn’t a doctor’s territory, and it’s not his job. *However, with Isaac in that shape... If he were here, I’m sure he’d...* Working from that thought, he speaks. “Lady Aileen may have a way to ask the holy king for that favor.”

Startled, Ares looks up.

“In addition, we don’t have a military strong enough to stand against the Queendom of Hausel. That’s all I can say.”

“.....”

“All right, Auguste. Stand guard.”

“When I’m like this?!” Auguste has crawled to the wall and is sitting against it, looking dismayed.

Luc snorts at him. “For a lackey of Lady Aileen’s, this should be nothing. Just nod and accept it.”

None of these people has the grit to be a true lackey. Shrugging it off, Luc leaves the room. He’s a busy man. Although Keith’s condition has stabilized, he hasn’t regained consciousness yet.

And the biggest headache he’s got is—

“Isaac, I’m back.”

Leaving the NO VISITORS sign in place, Luc calls to the patient in the clinic bed.

Isaac—who's ostensibly still unconscious, like Keith—glances at him. "How was the general?"

"I lit a fire under him. We may manage to drag Ashmael into this now."

"I see. What about Demon King Senior?"

"Lady Aileen seems to have won him over."

"That's Aileen for you, all right... It doesn't look like the adviser's gonna make it in time."

"It really doesn't..."

"Well, he's more about moral support than combat power, so that's fine."

Isaac sits up. His only injuries are a bump on the head and a broken right arm. Even those weren't caused by being buried under the rubble: He got hurt when the fenrirs were rescuing him. When they brought him in, he was disoriented, but he was never in serious condition.

Isaac was the one who told Luc to claim he was unconscious and badly wounded, and to turn away all visitors. Luc assumed he had his reasons, so he agreed.

Now, though, he's beginning to regret it just a little.

"They should be able to plan the operation in earnest now. What do you intend to do?"

"Do? Nothing. I'm badly wounded and unconscious, remember?"

"But you're Lady Aileen's right-hand man."

"Having a traitor shove his oar in at a time like this makes everything way too complicated. It would just cause problems."

The trouble is that his concern sounds entirely reasonable.

"Lester isn't an idiot, so they'll be fine. My job's over. I've got no part to play now."

"Is that so." Luc backs down quietly.

This calls for drastic measures. What on earth could be distracting him so

much? Is it that sweet girl who's missing, or is it because this is the second time he's done something with the full knowledge that it will make Aileen sad?

Either way, the fact that Isaac hasn't anticipated what Luc will do in this situation is proof that he's not thinking normally.

You must know I'd never send Lady Aileen into battle without you.

Good grief. Not one of these people has the grit to be a true lackey.

I wish they'd model their behavior on mine. Luc sighs heavily.

"...Can I ask you to deliver a message to the crown princess?" Ares asks quietly, right around the time Auguste's strength finally returns.

Sitting on the floor with his legs kicked out in front of him, Auguste bites his lip. He'd seen this coming. Under the circumstances, there's no other way. It's the only thing Ares can do to save Sahra.

"You only used that wife of yours so you could become king."

"No. I wanted to be king because—"

"Don't say you did it for her! You did it for yourself, and you know it."

On the bed, Ares starts to argue, then falls silent. "That's right," he says softly.

So...? So what? That doesn't fix anything. Knocking his forehead against his raised knee, Auguste exhales. *Get it together, man.*

There's no room for personal feelings in this. The Queendom of Hausel might attack them. The more firepower they have, the better.

The type of man who succeeds can probably make the right choice in these situations. Those men wouldn't let the fact that they hate this affect their decisions.

"...Fine. I'll go arrange it." Auguste climbs to his feet.

Ares's eyes widen slightly. Ignoring him, Auguste starts to leave the room before his resolution falters.

"I do remember you."

His hand is on the doorknob when the other man speaks to him. His voice is

brusque. “I may have been torn up already, but that was the first time anyone ever took me down instantly.”

“...Oh yeah?”

“If Sahra can be saved, after that, you can do whatever you want to me.”

Grinding his teeth, Auguste leaves the room without responding. He slams the door, then stomps loudly up the corridor, wiping away the pointless moisture that wells up in his eyes.

It would be a lot easier if the bad guys just stayed bad.

Swallowing down his own ugliness and bitterness, he faces forward again. Just then, his shoulder knocks into someone. It’s Serena.

“Hey, watch where you’re go— What’s the matter?”

“...What do you mean?”

“Are you okay?” Serena frowns, sounding unusually concerned.

He wonders what sort of face he’s making, and it starts to strike him as kind of funny.

“I’m fine. Sorry, I need to talk to Lady Aileen.”

As he starts forward again, she grabs his arm.

When he turns, Serena is glaring at him. Her forehead is furrowed, and her hand is squeezing his arm so hard it hurts. *Is she angry?* He feels himself tense up. “Wh-what?”

“—...Guh...guh...”

“Guh? What’s wrong—?” He bends down a little, and she hauls on his arm. Her lips zoom in so fast he thinks she may be about to bite him, but instead she presses them briefly to his cheek.

“Good luck!”

Yelling the words like a parting shot, Serena leaves him there.

Auguste blinks, dazedly running his fingers over his cheek. He breaks into a grin. Even he thinks he’s too easy. It’s fine that way, though.

He loves her. She's cute. He wants to protect her. He wants to make her wishes come true. He wants to win. He wants a future where everyone can be happy, even the bad guys, even if he can't forgive them.

If he's allowed to wish for that, that would be best.

Her heart is thudding away in her chest. She'd gotten far too nervous over a simple kiss on the cheek. She knows that, but the heat won't leave her face, and her rough footsteps stay rough.

It's because he's a wimp! Because he was walking around looking like that!

His expression was cold enough to send a shudder down her spine. Instinct told her it would be bad to leave him that way, but she wasn't able to think of anything to say. During the few seconds she held him there, she desperately cast around for someone to emulate. She thought of Aileen and Rachel first, but rejected them immediately. Those two were tragically lacking in the ability to get their men to do what they wanted.

The next ones who came to mind were, rather incredibly, Lilia and Sahra. She was sure those two would have managed this situation skillfully, though. They'd see their men off with touching bravery even as they worried about them; they'd encourage them and wish for their safety at the same time, using a single kiss to resolve all sorts of sophisticated things that would be quite long if put into words, deceiving their men while setting them back on the right track. She could visualize both the sight and the process without trouble.

However, if she closed her eyes for him, would that blockhead Auguste know what to do? Definitely not.

That meant she had to make the first move. She didn't understand the situation at all, but Auguste was simpleminded, so that was probably enough to set him back on the right track.

"If it wasn't, I'll send that idiot flying with a kick in the ass!"

"It's probably fine, but I think you should have done it more sweetly!"

"And you! Stop spying like it's normal!"

Lilia has appeared out of nowhere, but Serena doesn't even flinch anymore.

She's yelled at her without missing a beat, and Lilia looks annoyed. "Gracious, that was just a coincidence..."

"Oh, yes, I'm sure. What do you want? Sahra's still out."

"I want you to help me! I'm going to drag you into it even if you refuse, so please!"

"You call that a request? ...Fine." Serena nods, disgruntled, and Lilia looks startled. That's gratifying, and Serena snorts. "I need to if we're going to win, right? In that case, I'll help. As my reward, guarantee my happiness, too."

"....."

"What about Sahra? Is it okay to leave her asleep?"

This woman just might know a way to wake her up, Serena thinks.

For some reason, Lilia sighs deeply, gazing into the distance. "This is going so smoothly... I wish you'd dig in your heels more."

"What are you, a pervert? Oh, come to think of it, that's right: You are."

"There you go again, drawing your own random conclusions. Well, never mind. We are the league of heroines, after all!"

Lilia strikes a sweet, kittenish pose. Then slowly, slowly, she turns to face Serena. It's just as if she considers her an equal. "Sahra is fine. She's an unexpectedly earnest character, you know. Once her work is finished, I think she'll come back."

"Her work? ...Wait, does this have something to do with the way she sealed that right hand?"

"Yes. When that woman took it back, she went with it. With the soul that was in that hand, I mean."

...Whose had that been?

Serena almost asks, but Lilia gives her a significant smile. "By now, I'm sure I don't have to tell you who it belonged to. That woman pared away that soul's power and made it her own."

"Then Sahra's..."

“She’s apparently having a hard time of it, but healing is where the Daughter of God really shines. She can even repair souls. That’s just like a heroine, isn’t it? They should all be like that.”

Lilia smiles as if she’s having a grand old time. Then she leans in, peeking up into Serena’s face. “The conditions for the ending are all in place. The only thing we don’t have is a way to win.”

“You mean a way to beat that woman, when even Lady Aileen couldn’t stop her.”

“Right. I’ll come up with that.” Twirling away as lightly as any dancer, Lilia turns her back. “I am the player, you see. I’ll choose the ending my favorite characters want to see.”

“Your favorite...”

“Don’t worry! Lady Aileen’s my top favorite, but I’ll put you in there as well, Serena! Sahra, too.”

There she goes with that nonsense again, she thinks, but then a doubt crosses her mind.

...Are you including yourself in that ending?

The woman always wears an unreadable smile, as if she feels that she alone is different. Serena’s always been unsettled by her. She’s never liked her.

However— Serena bites her lip, then swallows that doubt.

“I’ll fill you in on the details later! All right, I’m off.”

“...When that woman retook that right hand, you came to help us, didn’t you?”

“Hmm?”

“Sahra and me. Thanks.”

There’s a brief pause, and then Lilia gives a little laugh; she’s remembered. “I was already helping Lady Aileen. It wasn’t out of my way.” With that, she heads back down the corridor, her footsteps graceful.

Liar. Serena narrows her eyes. Even if Aileen hadn’t been there, she thinks

Lilia would have come running to save them.

After all, that was the moment she looked just like the Maid of the Sacred Sword Serena once idolized.

“And so I’ve found Master Luciel and won his cooperation! Now we’ll be able to use the demons as well. We’ve also secured Master Ares’s help, which raises our combat strength!”

Aileen makes this announcement the moment she enters the conference room. James is already waiting inside, and he narrows his eyes. Lester, who’s standing over a spread-out map, looks perplexed.

“How on earth...?”

“Don’t ask useless questions,” James says flatly.

Lester’s eyebrows draw together. “It isn’t a useless question. It’s an extremely important one. Can we trust them?”

“I understand the logic, but when it comes to the crown princess, it’s a useless question.”

“That’s right, it’s useless for humans to ponder the gods’ intentions!”

Luciel has abruptly materialized in midair, startling Lester so badly that his legs almost buckle. The man is holding a dish of pudding, and Aileen’s eyes narrow. “Father! Didn’t I tell you the pudding was for tomorrow?!”

“Oh, but it looked so tasty.”

“Honestly! I had Walt and Kyle guarding you. What are they—?”

“Found Master Lucieeeeeel! Yessss, his behavior patterns match Master Claude’s. This’ll work out somehow!”

“He’s exactly the same, right down to the way he leaves his guards and wanders off on his own!”

Walt and Kyle have charged into the room. They’re out of breath, but in a way, this is perfectly normal. Luciel blinks at them, startled. “I didn’t think you’d find me so fast.”

“Yes, well, we’re used to this!”

“Don’t think you can get away. We’ve been trained by Master Claude!”

“...I, um, I’m sorry about both of us. Here, say ‘aaaah.’”

Still floating, Luciel gives Walt and Kyle a spoonful of pudding each. Thinking she should whip this oddly relaxed mood into shape, Aileen claps her hands. “This is no time for games. Considering how long it will take to prepare, we’ll need to have our plan ready today, or tomorrow at the latest. We must begin our war council now, so please leave us, Father.”

“Nope.”

“What do you mean, ‘nope’—?” She’s about to complain, but he tosses pudding into her mouth. As Aileen swallows in spite of herself, Luciel descends, landing in front of her.

“This is about my precious son and my beloved wife. I want in. You don’t mind, do you, my sweet Aileen?”

“.....!”

His features and tone are the same as Claude’s, and she would have blushed if she hadn’t deliberately tensed her cheeks to prevent it. As a result, she ends up looking strange. Luciel chuckles, as if her confusion is an open book to him. “My daughter-in-law is sooo cute.”

“...I’ll tell Master Claude on you!”

“Go right ahead. The boy doesn’t listen to a thing I say, he won’t call me ‘Father,’ he gives me the cold shoulder, and now I’m getting annoyed. Insolent, isn’t he? Even though he’s just my son.” Abruptly changing his tune, Luciel shovels pudding into his mouth. “He’s mocking me outright. That calls for punishment. It’s a hundred years too early for him to try to stand in for me.”

“But isn’t that because you were incompetent, Father?”

“If you talk like that, I’ll attack with this face. Just so you know, it’s the only thing that even my wife couldn’t resist!”

He can’t possibly be bragging, can he?

While she’s preoccupied with feeling appalled, Luciel sets a chair next to a sunny window, securing a place for himself in what’s likely the warmest spot in

the room. Walt and Kyle take up positions on either side of him.

“I’d like to get an idea of the general plan, too.”

“We won’t get in the way.”

If Walt and Kyle are taking that stance, it will be nearly impossible to make him leave.

“You should let him attend, Aileen. We should summon everyone who’s able to move, really.”

“James? But nothing’s been decided yet...”

“I approve of having everyone attend as well, Your Highness.” When she turns around, Lester shrugs and pushes his glasses up. “I don’t know who will wear what expression, what they’re capable of, what they’re likely to think, or what they’ll say. That’s a grave handicap. If Isaac Lombard were to fill me in on everything, the situation would be different, but...”

“Isaac is...”

“If he’s not here, then I’d appreciate it if you’d show me all your cards.”

The corners of Lester’s lips rise. He’s right, though: If she’s going to have him take over even part of Isaac’s role, there’s no choice.

Just as she’s about to take a deep breath, James smoothly steps in front of her. “Give us a little time. We’ll talk it over among ourselves.”

“...Avoiding making a decision on the spot is an old politician’s trick.”

“You have to report to someone the fact that the demon king’s been found, don’t you? What about the Queendom of Hausel?” Aileen looks up, and James puts an arm in front of her, checking her. “These negotiations are necessary. In the event that we lose, we have to ensure that at least Cedric’s faction survives.”

“But it isn’t just us they’re after; they’re targeting Lady Lilia, too!”

“That’s right. That’s why this fellow will ally himself with us... Right up until he’s certain we’re going to lose, at any rate.”

However, they do have to avoid the worst possible outcome.

Lester exhales heavily, pushing his glasses up slightly. “Winning would be optimal. That said, Your Highness, we do have to think about how we would handle a loss.”

“...Very true. You don’t need to worry about that, though. In the unlikely event that we are unable to restore Master Claude to normal, I’ve already decided on our course of action.”

Lester looks as if he wasn’t quite expecting this, and Aileen continues brightly, “I will kill him.”

Everyone looks at her, shocked. She smiles back at them with no hesitation, holding her head high. “After all, I am his wife. It’s only natural, isn’t it?”

Behind her, she hears something crash to the floor.

When she turns, the first thing she sees is the tea-stained carpet, littered with cups and a tray. Then she registers Lilia’s quivering figure. She assumes the woman had been bringing in a tray of tea—but of course, she has a very bad feeling about this.

“Gracious... Lady Aileen... Lady Aileen, you’re so dashing...!”

Before she can back away, Lilia has thrown herself into her arms. “Why are you so incredibly gallant, Lady Aileen?! Simply being forced to choose between your beloved and the world makes my heart pound, and now this? That’s just—That’s my favorite all over!”

“I am being serious! Could you not speak like that?!”

“It’s all right, I’ll let you win!”

“Oh, I see. How very kind of you!”

Lilia’s hugging her tightly. Aileen yells angrily, tearing her way free, and Lilia giggles. “I mean it. I’ll give you a way to beat that woman.”

“Huh...?”

“Lilia! It’s very likely that you’re a target. You don’t need to go out there.”

“Oh, honestly, Lester! If we all work together, we can win. It’ll be fine. ‘Hear, O past. Open, O future. I am the maiden who inherits the regalia of saints and

demons,' and so on!"

Lilia's carefree attitude draws an exasperated grimace from Lester. Aileen's head aches as well, but for a different reason. *She's coughed up some terribly familiar lines from the game. How utterly shameless!*

Registering Aileen's cold gaze, Lilia puffs her cheeks out. "Oh, you don't believe me! That's so rude. Well, to be honest, I'd like to see you shattered after losing the demon king, too, Lady Aileen. Oooh, I mustn't, just imagining it makes me shiver..."

"Listen, you!"

"More than that, though, I couldn't stand to have you lose to that woman." Lilia distances herself from Aileen in one neat pirouette, turning her back on her. "That wouldn't be the least bit funny. My favorite, lose to an old hag whose only skills are dreaming of the future and seeing the past, and who's gone around the bend over her first love? Let's get out there and defeat Her Majesty already."

"...But Lilia. The queen of Hausel is your—" With a guilty start, Lester shuts his mouth.

Aileen's eyes narrow. "What?"

"This is our affair. Don't concern yourself with—"

"Oh, didn't I say? The queen of Hausel is my mother!"

This really does leave Aileen speechless. So that's why Lester has been thinking of how they'd handle a loss.

If Ellmeyer deposes the demon king and installs Cedric as the emperor with Lilia as his empress, even if the empire is reduced to a puppet, it will probably survive. It's also significant that Lilia is being targeted, not by the Queendom of Hausel, but by Amelia herself.

Even Amelia must have political enemies. If we can work with those, he's right: We'll have room to negotiate.

When her thoughts have taken her that far, she feels as if a weight has been lifted from her shoulders.

Aileen isn't alone.

In that case, there are only two things she must think about: winning and Claude.

"...Lester. I believe you should do as you think best."

Lester looks at her, startled. Aileen shrugs. "However, your precious Lady Lilia seems determined to let me win. Keep that in mind."

He scowls, irritated. It isn't clear whether Lilia really understands; she clings to Aileen's arm, saying "Yes, that's right, you heard her."

"Thank you very much for your advice and understanding. In that case, you should go wake up Isaac Lombard. Tell him we've read all his moves."

"Your consideration is appreciated. Let's reconvene here at this time tomorrow," James says, wrapping up the conversation.

Lester snorts and, in a welcome development, takes Lilia and leaves.

James sets a hand on Aileen's shoulder, which has finally relaxed. "Are you all right?"

"Yes. Maybe it's because the tension has eased a bit; I haven't done a thing, but I'm tired..."

"Prime Minister d'Autriche and I will lay the political groundwork. Lester may not sound like it, but he wants us to win. No doubt he'll negotiate with the Queendom covertly and pass information to us at the same time."

"Yes, probably. However, it's dangerous to place too much trust in Lady Lilia. We mustn't clue her in to our plan. With that in mind, let us think about who and what to use where. That floating palace, though... What can we do about that? We know far too little about it."

It can't possibly be a mere building that travels through the sky.

"Even if it doesn't attack, we can't have them...dropping it on the imperial capital, for example. We have Master Claude and the queen to deal with as well; how should we handle this? If Isaac were here, he'd come up with something."

“For now, let’s muster everyone who’s mobile.”

“Yes, please do that. If we all put our heads together, we may come up with a good plan.”

James nods, opens the door, and goes out.

As if taking his place, a cry of “Demons!” echoes from beyond the conference room.

This is the imperial castle. The old castle would be another story, but Aileen has given the demons strict orders not to leave. What are they doing? She flings open the door of the conference room, then startles. “Luc? Quartz, too... Why are you here?”

“Oh, Lady Aileen, there you are. All right, Sugar, this way.”

“Right, turn right! Forward march!”

“Yip-yip!”

Sugar issues directions, Ribbon responds, and two rows of fenrirs and giant spiders carry in a big cloth sack stuffed with...something.

As Aileen’s standing there stunned, a muffled voice issues from the sack. “Hey, where are you taking me? And why can’t I move? What did you dose me with, Luc?!”

“It’s fine. Your mind is clear, isn’t it?”

“What about that is ‘fine,’ you quack doctor?! Come on, let me down! What are you trying to pull?!”

“...You already know. What a poor loser.”

“Don’t screw with me, Quartz! Put! Me! Down! My arm’s broken— Hey, don’t shake me, don’t jump around, I’m injured!”

“...Isaac.”

Dumbfounded, Aileen stares at the face that has emerged from the sack. Then she runs to him, delighted. “Isaac! You’re awake!”

“...! Luc, Quartz, you little—!”

“Yes, Lady Aileen, that’s right. He finally woke up, so we brought him here.”

“...As you can see, he’s fine.”

“Oh, I’m glad... I’m so glad.”

But what’s going on here? If they’d told her, they wouldn’t have had to drag him out here; she would have gone to them. As she’s puzzling over that, Luc and Quartz take Isaac out of the sack and sit him down in one of the conference room’s chairs.

“Mission accomplished!”

“Yip!”

Sugar gives a crisp salute, and Ribbon looks quite proud. Then they line up so Quartz can adorn each of them with a flower at the door. Apparently this is their reward.

Luciel has watched this play out, and he seems impressed. “That’s amazing. Humans got demons to grant their request?”

“Oh, right. My apologies; we borrowed the demons without permission.”

“No, no, it’s fine, as long as they don’t mind. Claude probably knew about this — Oh, a flower for me, too? ...Erm, thank you?”

“...We want you to send the demons back. We can’t lead them on the return trip.”

“Oh, I see.”

Quartz beckons the demons over and has them fall in line. After Luciel has watched him call roll, he snaps his fingers and the demons vanish instantly.

“And? What’s all this fuss about?”

“Well, you see, Isaac just wouldn’t... I tried to stop him, but he said he wanted to help you out right this minute and tried to head over. He left us with no choice, Lady Aileen, so we brought him here.”

“Luc, you bastard.”

Standing behind Isaac’s chair, Luc takes out a syringe and flashes the needle at him. “It’s a truth serum. If you refuse to lie, I’ll dose you with it.”

“That makes no sense. Quartz, stop this guy!”

“...It’s your fault.”

“What is all this?”

Aileen knits her eyebrows. Isaac averts his eyes, and Luc glares at him with a smile. Quartz sighs, then turns to Aileen. “...Aileen. Isaac is—”

“—Give up on the demon king,” Isaac says before Quartz can explain. He doesn’t look up.

“That woman has fewer holy swords now, but she can use both those and the sacred sword. There’s no telling what that floating palace will do, and on top of that, the demon king’s on her side. Even if Demon King Senior’s on ours, our chances of winning are slim. So forget it: Give Demon King Senior to them, make Cedric crown prince again, publish the fact that Lilia Reinoise is the daughter of the queen of Hausel, and form a coalition with all the other countries.”

“W-wait, Isaac. What are you saying...?”

“If you do that, the Kingdom of Ashmael will be able to intercede openly. I’ve already set it up with the holy king; you go rejoin his harem. If we tell everyone he’s keeping an eye on you, your safety will be guaranteed. After all, without the sacred sword, you’ll just be a widow who lost a power struggle.”

“Are you suggesting that I run away?! Give up on Master Claude, abandon the demons, sacrifice Master Luciel, cast the entire country aside, and bend the knee to the Queendom of Hausel?!”

“Yes!” Isaac raises his head, looking her straight in the eye. “That’s the surest way to keep casualties to a minimum. For the moment, at least, what other way is there?! Even you must have realized it by now. If you really can’t stand to give him up, then fight him, but do it later. At least wait until we’ve figured out how to make the demon king human again!”

“Master Claude is certain to return, and so—”

“On what grounds, huh? In a situation like this, I’m not accepting something shaky like ‘the power of love’!”

“If we can’t turn Master Claude back, then I will put an end to him myself. In that case—”

“In that case, you’re planning to die and follow him and you know it!!”

A hush fills the conference room.

James has returned at some point, bringing Auguste with him. Both are watching them, holding their breath.

Aileen and Isaac are panting, shoulders heaving, as if they were sprinting for all they’re worth. Then Isaac smiles. “That makes twice.”

“Isaac?”

“Me telling you to drop a guy because he’s no good, and then helping it happen.”

Even so, Isaac keeps his eyes fixed on Aileen. His words sound like a prayer, or a challenge. “No one else can stop you. That’s why I will.”

“...Isaac.”

“Besides, I sold you out. Don’t expect me to cooperate.”

Isaac laughs at himself, then shuts up, as if demonstrating he has nothing left to say.

Luc glances at Quartz. Quartz slowly shakes his head. James and Auguste, who are still standing in the doorway, exchange looks. By the window, Walt and Kyle also look from Aileen to Isaac and back, seeming troubled.

The painful silence drags on...

“Say, James? You seem to be glowing.”

Luciel, who’s eating his pudding, breaks the awkward silence.

A beat later, James pats himself down, then says “Ah,” and holds out an object. “I-it’s a sacred item. It was in the old castle, so we could contact the holy king. At this point we’re hardly ever there, so I’ve been carrying it around with me.”

“It’s really weak, but I’m pretty sure it’s reacting.”

“Don’t tell me... Is Master Baal calling us?”

Hastily, James sets the pebble-sized item in the center of the conference room table. It glows faintly, then winks out, blinking listlessly.

“I bet it doesn’t have enough sacred power. We’ll have to charge it.”

“I—I can’t do that. Even Lady Lilia isn’t suited to... What about you, Father?!”

“Mmm, I dunno. My magic’s stronger now.”

“I-I’ll go call Serena!”

“That’s it!” James agrees, and Auguste is off like a shot.

“What do you people think I am?!”

As Serena enters the conference room, she’s already yelling at them. Even so, she promptly holds a hand over the sacred item that blinks on the table, on the verge of dying completely. Auguste looks worn out. He must have taken plenty of abuse for the rest of them on the way here.

While they’re all offering silent prayers, the makeshift communication device flares with light. An impressed “Oooh...” goes up from no one in particular.

“I expected nothing less. What a convenient charger.”

“I heard that, cambion. You’re dead meat.”

“Be quiet. I can hear something...”

There’s a snap, and the sacred item projects a screen over the table. It looks like a full-length mirror, and the figure in it belongs to...

“Denis?!”

“Oh—I got through! Hooray! I’ve got a connection, Elefas!”

“Have you really?!”

“Hey, Aileen is small!!” Beelzebuth says, his image filling the screen. A black chest and a red choker are just visible on top of his head, pushing it down.

“Beelzebuth and Almond! You’re there, too?!”

“It talked?!”

“Small Aileen talked!”

“Yeah, that’s what that device does. C’mon, get out of the way. We dunno how long the connection’s gonna last. Go, go, get; the cookies are almost ready.”

“Jasper, you too?!”

Jasper flashes her a broad grin, but immediately yields his spot to Elefas. The mage sighs; the fatigue is clear on his face. “Thank goodness it went well. I thought I might end up working myself to death. Denis is unbelievable. He’s pulled multiple all-nighters, and he’s still trying to make something else...”

“What’s happened to you? Where are you? Is everyone all right?”

“Oh, yes, I’m sorry. We’re all fine, and we’re in the Queendom of Hausel— Or rather, we may have left Hausel by now, but we’re in its flying palace.”

Aileen finds herself leaning over the table. “How on earth did you get into—?”

“We entered via the spot where you emerged at the ceremonial site, but then the palace rose into the air and we were trapped inside its barrier— That’s the gist of it, at any rate. There’s no barrier here in the kitchen; however, there is one just outside, and the place is swarming with white-colored soldiers. We decided we should at least try to contact you, so Denis and I managed to cobble together a communications device.”

“You managed to cobble together...” As Aileen listens, she feels more appalled than impressed.

“It won’t last very long, though. We can’t replenish the sacred stone’s power, and there’s a risk that the transmission will be intercepted. How are things over there? I hear they’ve declared war. And Master Luciel...?”

“Master Luciel is here. He says he’ll help us.”

“Then you’re currently buying time. I see. Do you have a plan?”

“Well, erm...,” she says vaguely, glancing at Isaac. Isaac won’t look at her, and he says nothing.

“So, as I thought, Isaac is attempting to desert?”

Isaac's eyebrows twitch. Aileen turns back to Elefas's image. "As you thought?"

"Oh, I had a hunch that he might. That's very good, yes, we'll get to harass him! You know, I feel as if I've endured everything just for this moment!"

"What are you talking about?" Isaac asks curtly.

Elefas's smile grows brighter. "Lady Aileen. There's one among us that I haven't yet mentioned. Our group consists of myself, Bel, Almond, Denis, Jasper—and Rachel."

"Huhn?! You're right in the middle of enemy territory! What's she doing there?!" Serena shouts, while Isaac turns around so fast, his chair rocks.

Even Aileen is startled into yelling, "Why on earth would you drag Rachel into this?! She's—"

"I know. She's simply a sweet, ordinary young woman, unskilled in combat and not particularly strong. That is precisely why I thought we would need her: just in case even you failed to persuade him, Lady Aileen. Are you listening, Isaac?"

"Elefas, you'd better not be telling me—!" Isaac bolts to his feet, kicking his chair away. Bandaged right arm and all, he closes in on the screen that's showing Elefas.

"Please save us, Isaac."

"You brought her along just for that?!"

Isaac looks desperate. At the sight of his face, Elefas snorts contemptuously. "That's right. If you're going to hold a grudge, hold it against yourself for counting on someone like me to help you."

"You lousy piece of—"

"Come, think about it. We have no other recourse. I can't use magic, and Beelzebuth and Almond won't be any use in a fight."

"I'm not changing my stance. I have no reason to change it for that woman!"

Isaac's answer makes Serena scowl, but Elefas dismisses it with a laugh.

“Rachel has been saying something similar, but I’m not convinced. You are Lady Aileen’s first lackey, and Lady Aileen always wants it all. Someone like you would never choose Lady Aileen alone.”

“...What’s that supposed to mean?”

“If you protect Lady Aileen, you’ll automatically secure Rachel’s safety as well.”

Isaac’s throat seems to have gone suspiciously dry. His face twists.

“Oh, yes. I’m told you complimented me. Thank you very much.”

“Wow, look at the bundles of energy this guy has all of a sudden... This old man’s feeling kinda bad for him.”

“Elefas is the type who goes to way more trouble than he has to, isn’t he? — Oh, I’ll try sticking this and this together.”

“The king was boasting about how underhanded his mage was!”

“Cookies, yum, yum! Rachel, over here!”

“And so I’ll leave the final attempt at persuasion to Rachel.”

Startled, Isaac tries to back away, but Luc and Serena grab his arms.

“Y-you people... Lemme go!”

“Don’t run, you louse!”

“Come, Isaac, sit down and listen to Rachel.”

“You don’t have to worry. If he tries to make a run for it, we’ll tie him up.”

James shrugs, glancing at Auguste. Auguste smiles wryly, Walt gives a thumbs-up, and Kyle nods back at him soberly. Turning pale, Isaac looks at Aileen.

“You’re okay with this? Leaving your precious lady-in-waiting in danger?!”

“Mmm, she really is outstanding, isn’t she. I’m terribly impressed.”

“Listen, you...!”

“Th-thank you very much for the compliment, Lady Aileen.”

At the sound of Rachel’s voice, Isaac freezes and falls silent.

Rachel has taken Elefas's place on the screen. Folding her arms, Aileen smiles at her. "You look well. I'm relieved to see it; you disappeared so suddenly. I've been having quite a hard time getting dressed, you know."

"I-I'm terribly sorry. If you're having difficulties with anything, please ask me about it now, while there's time."

"Let's see. You heard what Elefas was saying, didn't you? Isaac won't help me, and that's been quite troublesome. May I count on you?"

Rachel gulps slightly. Then she nods, as if she's made up her mind. "Yes. If there's anything I can do."

"I see. In that case, this is something only you can do. Thank you for your help."

With that, Aileen steps to the side.

Isaac refuses to look at the screen. Timidly, Rachel starts to speak. "Um..."

"—Hey, perfect timing. Help me stop Aileen."

"What?" Rachel blinks.

Isaac speaks rapidly, still not looking at her. "She has close to zero chance of winning this, but she won't listen. Don't worry; I fixed it so you could get asylum in Ashmael along with her. If the negotiations go well, I'll think of a way you can all get out of there."

"What? Um, please wait. Th-that isn't what we're talking about now..."

"We've got nothing else to discuss. Or what, did you want me to apologize for something?"

"That is not what she's saying, and I am this close to punching you!"

"Serena, don't! I—I know how you feel, but just settle down for now."

"And you, Rachel! This man is a fool! How long are you going to—?"

"Is that all you wanted to say?"

Rachel's voice seems to reverberate in the pits of their stomachs. Instantly, the noisy conference room falls silent.

“That is all you had to say, isn’t it,” she repeats, making sure. Her gaze is level and steady.

Isaac has realized that something’s different, and he backpedals. “I, uh... There was nothing I wanted to say in the first place.”

“I see. In that case, I’m going to speak now, so be quiet. Her chances of winning are only ‘close to zero,’ and not ‘zero,’ correct? In that case, do something about it. Right this minute. Go on.”

“Wh-what? Who said you get to give the orders around he—?”

“I don’t want the man I love to regret the same thing twice!”

Isaac’s eyes are open as wide as they’ll go. Rachel screams at him in a tear-choked voice, “Are you stupid? Y-you always act as if I don’t understand a thing!”

“That’s...not really...”

“Then why did you say you’d turned traitor for my sake?! That was ridiculous! Did you think I’d believe it?! You know I never would!”

“C-c’mon, believe it at least a little...”

“Why?! Because you love me?!”

The direct question finally shuts Isaac up.

However, Rachel keeps right on going, her expression grim. “There you go again, thinking of ways to cover for yourself! You won’t fool me, though! After all, I was the only one you came to say goodbye to. You tried to make me hate you properly. That’s why you...said something...so stupid... Why would you...? When telling me you’d done it for me was the best love confession you could manage!”

“.....”

“How could I not know I was special to you after that...?!”

Choking, Rachel covers her face and starts to cry.

Isaac’s eyes don’t leave the floor, but abruptly, there’s a gentle smile on his lips. “Even so, I’m not gonna help.”

“You little— You’re still...!”

“Serena, seriously, stop!”

“Only an idiot would throw the woman he loves into a fight where the odds of winning aren’t even five percent.” Serena, who’s grabbed a cushion off a chair and raised it threateningly, freezes. “So please. Don’t tell me to do something about this. Just come back.”

On the other side of the screen, Rachel sobs. As if Serena can’t take this, she hurls the cushion to the floor.

Auguste picks it up, brushes the dust off it—then looks up. “In that case, I’ll use a holy sword to stop that woman. James will help.” Serena’s head snaps up, but Auguste’s smile is focused on Isaac. “We still have that general’s holy sword and the one Serena had. If James and I fight together, she won’t take us out that easily. We’ll be able to keep her pinned down for a time at least. From what I heard, the general’s sword is as strong as the sacred sword if Serena gives it power.”

“Just a... Listen, you, that’s easy to say, but—”

“It’ll be fine. I have to make a success of myself, you know. Right, James?”

“...At least with those lethal rains of holy swords, we won’t see anything like the density we did earlier. I would think you’d know that better than anyone, Isaac.”

Isaac looks at Auguste and James, then responds quietly, “The demon king’s stronger than that, though.”

“I’ll do something about Claude. Me and these guards. Won’t we?” Luciel waggles his spoon left, then right, and Walt and Kyle respond in turn.

“I figured that was where this was going... Wow, I bet the death rate on that mission will be sky-high.”

“That’s nothing new. Besides, if Master Claude is gone, our bodies will only last three or four more years at best. At least this way we’ll get to choose how we die.”

“Yeah, true.” Walt shrugs.

Aileen takes a step forward. “Isaac. The only remaining issue now is that floating palace.”

“...We’re way too short on intel.”

“Oh— I calculated the overall size and mass of the building based on its layout and the construction techniques! I also drew up a diagram of the interior, although it’s just a projection!” Denis says, abruptly stepping in from the side to join Rachel.

Peeking in around the edge, Jasper smiles. “Your uncle Jasper here mapped out the route this thing’s following. That noble fiend of a mage tied demon stones to Beelzebuth and Almond, and they flew around and did some heavy-duty scouting for me.”

“I worked hard! I spied the plane! I hit my head!”

“I learned how to tell direction from the angle of the sun! Isn’t that incredible?!”

Everyone’s shoving their way onto the screen, and they’re all talking at once. It’s chaos, with Rachel standing in the middle.

Quartz, who’s been watching the lively screen along with Isaac, asks a quiet question. “...If you join now, won’t it be five percent?”

“Absolutely. Or do you need me to give you a stimulant that will motivate you but might kill you?”

“If you want to motivate him, you need the right person, not a drug.” Serena turns her gaze from Luc, who’s blinking at her, to the screen.

Aileen looks at the same person.

Registering their gazes, Rachel immediately gets flustered. “Huh? M-muh... me? Not...Lady Aileen...?”

“What are you saying, Rachel? Who would it be but you?”

“...Don’t be stupid. She can’t do that.” Isaac snorts. Neither Aileen nor Serena says a word.

Rachel looks up sharply. “In that case, Isaac, if you won’t save me, I’ll marry

Elefas!’

“Huh?!”

Isaac’s dumbfounded face is the best sight yet. While the sounds of people choking and bursting out laughing echo in the conference room and beyond the screen, Elefas speaks up, sounding pathetic. “Erm, having you treat marriage to me like a penalty game is rather wounding...”

“What? Oh, I’m sorry... Um, then, let’s see, um...”

“All right, come and marry your uncle Jasper, Rachel. I’m pretty serious, actually.”

“Don’t screw with me, man! How old do you think you are, huh?! Anyway, I’m not falling for something like that!”

“B-but if you save me, Isaac, I’ll marry you!”

Instantly, Isaac turns bright red all the way to his ears, and his gaze starts wandering restlessly. “Wha...look, what are you sayi—? There are some things you shouldn’t joke about, all right?!”



“I—I’m not joking! I mean it. I love you!! What about you?! Say it properly!”

Words fail Isaac. In that moment, the match is probably settled.

However, he keeps struggling: Just as Elefas said, Isaac is a poor loser. “I—I told you, that’s not what we’re talking about right now— What the heck are you doing, Quartz?! Leggo!”

“...Luc. The truth serum.”

“Yes, you’re right. Okay, time to be honest. You like Rachel, don’t you? You want to marry her, right?”

“Don’t screw with—”

“Jasper, Isaac has very little immunity to contracts and things like that. Let’s draw one up right now!”

“Hey, yeah. Uh, let’s see, how about, ‘If Young Master Isaac doesn’t help Lady Aileen, Rachel marries me; if he does cooperate, she marries me.’ Okay, Rachel, sign here.”

“Hey, both options are you! What kind of underhanded— Hold it, Luc, don’t you dare roll up my sleeve!”

“Proposing after being injected with a truth serum. Even your children will crack jokes about something so ridiculous.”

“...There’s no time. Show no mercy. Put him out of his misery...”

“What the hell is going on?! Aileen!”

“Just give up.”

Aileen cuts him down with a smile. It doesn’t pain her one bit. On an earlier occasion, when she had been the one asking for help, Isaac had cut her down just like that.

Quartz is holding Isaac in place while Luc’s syringe is slowly closing in on his left arm.

Aileen gives a rather pointed sigh. “I did think my right-hand man would be able to manage a bold love confession, at least... What a shame.”

“—Fine. Somebody hand me a map!” Isaac yells, finally giving up.

Rachel’s eyes slowly open.

Isaac has shaken free of Quartz and Luc. Using his uninjured left hand, he takes the map James has given him, unfolds it on the table, then grabs a deep breath. “Denis. Can you tell where the drive unit for that flying palace is?”

“I have a rough idea. Since we’re short on time, though, I think it would be reckless to try to remodel it so we can control it.”

“That’s fine; as long as we know the direction it’s heading, its speed and current location, I’ll figure something out. We need the altitude, too; have the demons check into that. I’ll send instructions later, so I’m ending this transmission for now. Hey, mage-fiend!”

“Yes? What is it?”

“You’re in charge over there. Don’t blow it. Also, you’d better take responsibility for bringing her with you, or I’ll destroy your hometown!”

“Understood,” Elefas says, trying and failing to bite back a smile.

Aileen calls to him, “Thank you, Elefas. Well done.”

“I am Master Claude’s vaunted mage, after all.”

“U-um, Isaac, I—”

“Don’t you dare sign the old guy’s contract! Sit tight and behave! —I’ll do something about this, okay?! Are you happy now?!”

His casual response makes Rachel’s face light up. “Y-yes... Yes! I’ll be waiting! I’ll trust you and wait, Isaac.”

“You will, huh? Then don’t say stuff nobody needs to hear. I’m ending the call.”

“W-wait, please! Um! I knew it, Isaac. When you’re helping Lady Aileen, I think you’re the most dashing, wonderful man in the world, and I love you!”

“Who cares?! Don’t come crying to me if you die, idiot!”

Yelling like a sore loser, Isaac smacks the sacred stone. The transmission cuts out. As he lets out a long breath, Aileen comes up beside him. “Shouldn’t you

have been dashing and told her, ‘I won’t let you die?’”

“I don’t promise stuff I can’t do, all right? ...We’re dealing with five percent here. Got it?”

“What are you talking about? Have I ever lost when you’re with me?”

Isaac gives another long sigh. Then he straightens up. “Call the holy king.”

“Master Baal? But we can’t get him involved.”

“That floating palace is gonna fall. We’re going to be nice and warn him.”

“Don’t tell me— You’re planning to drop it on Ashmael?” But the idea does make sense. If they bring the palace down, they won’t have to worry about what it can do or think up a way to deal with it.

Isaac gives a faint, slow smile. “We’re not dropping it. It’s just going to fall. The Kingdom of Ashmael’s got no luck.”

If they send a warning like that, the holy king will be forced to act in order to defend his kingdom.

Half disbelieving, half wryly amused, Aileen puts up a hand. “Honestly. You always use every piece on the board.”

“Pot, meet kettle. You’re seriously the last person I want to hear that from.”

In response, their palms connect with a smack.



For the first time in ages, she’s had a real dream. Not a prophetic one or a glimpse into the past. Simply a dream.

Having rushed to her coronation, her sister and brother-in-law smuggled her out of the castle and into the town at night, saying they were going to celebrate. A rather ridiculous dream—just a fantasy. A childish one that knew nothing of destiny.

She has the feeling it really did happen, but it’s part of a past that shouldn’t have existed. Therefore, it’s meaningless.

Have I grown careless?

Still feeling dazed, Amelia gets out of bed.

Visions of the past and dreams of the future have mocked her for centuries, but over the past few days, they've disappeared. It must be because her wish has come true.

She's taken back everything her sister stole from her. Now she'll live happily ever after.

However, as always, it's as if time in this room has stopped. Nothing moves. The warmth of her destined lover isn't there, either.

"...No doubt it's because it isn't over yet. I don't have everything I wanted."

Now that Luciel has awakened again, if she makes him a complete being, then she's sure...

Looking up at the slashed portrait, she murmurs to herself. That portrait at one time showed her real face. When she learned of her rightful destiny, she ripped it apart. It's been that way ever since. The palace was remade to function without people centuries ago, so there's no one to care.

Besides, the only bodies her soul was compatible with were her own original body and her sister's. If she'd had portraits of the historic queens painted, they would all have had one of those two faces. The queen doesn't show her face often, and she used divine items to empty the palace of people early on. Even so, if people saw her, things would get complicated.

She puts a hand to her cheek. If she were to have a portrait painted now, should she wear her own face, or her sister's? But even this, her sister's form, isn't "true." This is what she should have been, if her correct destiny had molded her. Her real sister's face wasn't this hollow.

She doesn't feel like being drawn in either form. That probably means that neither is what she wants.

What she's gained lost its value the moment it was hers. Of course it did. She only wanted to steal it. That was where its value lay: in the act of stealing. If she still lacks something, could it be a new body and face?

Not many bodies are compatible with a soul that possesses the sacred sword. She thought her own children might be and tried it. However, perhaps because her body's time was frozen, she only bore children who looked identical to her, and all of them were soulless, lacking wills and emotions of their own. They made ideal vessels, but they broke far too easily. They were nothing more than disposable copies.

The only exception was Lilia Reinoise.

From the moment she was born, she wailed loudly and knocked her mother's hands away. She had the will to live and an unmistakable soul. Amelia didn't need a dream to tell her she'd given birth to the next Maid of the Sacred Sword.

She didn't raise her nearby because she thought she might be able to use her body someday.

She's stolen Aileen Lauren d'Autriche's sacred sword.

The only remaining threat is her own daughter. Just one girl.

"...Yes. If I eliminate her, then I'll truly be happy."

Her body reacts before her mind does. She feels as if an explosion has occurred, somewhere far away. Just as she tells herself it must have been her imagination, a belated impact rocks the floor.

"Wha...?!"

The barrier is unchanged. She can't sense any magic or sacred power.

It can't be— Has something broken? she thinks, but then another explosion rings out, and the whole palace tilts. The furniture slides down the sharp new incline, but Amelia teleports before it reaches her.

Her destination is the throne, where her destined lover sits.

"Master Luciel! What on earth is this commotion—?"

His red eyes open. "You speak as if it's my fault."

"N-no... It's just that I didn't sense anything, so...I couldn't think of any other possibilities."

"There is one. Sacred power won't detect ordinary humans."

But the palace's pale soldiers eliminate intruders. When she points this out, the god of the demons rests his chin on his hand, smiling down from the throne. "They've camouflaged themselves with sacred stones. They're in the furnace room. It sounds as if they intend to bring this palace down... Now, what will you do?"

"It isn't a problem. If they drop it, and we let it fall in Ellmeyer—"

Outside, there's a flash of light and an impact. This time, Amelia senses the attack clearly. *Attacking a barrier of sacred power? But who would— The Holy Knight!*

She closes her eyes, and the outside scenery rises behind her eyelids. In it, she finds the Holy Knight with a holy sword, accompanied by a cambion. She also sees her brother-in-law, sharing his power with them.

Luciel must be seeing the same thing. He chuckles, deep in his throat. "Apparently they mean, 'Come on out. We've brought bait.' Humans are tough creatures. Even if they've lost their sacred sword."

It's strange. More than anything, that figure puts a slow smile on Amelia's lips.

A woman stands tall, directly in front of the palace—and she's holding a cursed sword. The holy swords were made in the image of the sacred sword, and this is a corrupted one that's filled with magic, so the name isn't wrong.

The Maid of the Cursed Sword.

That is what they call a woman who's stolen the sacred sword and debased it.

People had once called her that, since she'd acquired the sacred sword after her older sister.

She'd made others call her sister, the demon king's wife, by that name.

How curious. With her golden hair and sapphire eyes, the girl looks nothing like either of them, and yet she strikes her as similar. Why?

Why does the sight of her standing there elate Amelia so, and make her want to kill her this badly?

"Send the soldiers to the furnace room. Let me take care of the outside assailants, Master Luciel."

“You don’t mind?”

“No. I won’t let anyone take you again.”

Yes, this is happiness. The happiness she’s been hoping for.

◆ Tenth Act ◆

The Villainess Challenges the Heroine in Combat

It's time. Averting her eyes from the merciless march of the clock's second hand, Serena gazes at Sahra's unconscious form.

Isaac said that if she and Sahra were there, they'd have to take into account the fact that the enemy might steal them. He used Serena's power only to help them get ready. He didn't give her permission to go to the battlefield, and so Serena is still in the old castle with Sahra.

She pulls a chair over to Sahra's bedside and sits down. Talking to her doesn't seem as if it would hurt anything. "Your husband's gone off to fight, too."

"It'll be fine," Auguste told her, smiling. She poured all the power she had into the holy sword he carried, then watched him go.

Ironically, Sahra had watched Ares leave that same way, after he'd had the sacred stones embedded in his leg.

"Still...waiting really isn't my thing."

"Oh, I *know*!"

"You're late. Did you lose your guards?"

Lilia has appeared abruptly, but Serena rises without even flinching. The other girl looks disappointed. "You never give me a good reaction. Even Lady Aileen startles better than that!"

"You know we're short on time. Hurry up, give me your hand. If they spot what I did to Auguste's sword, we won't be able to teleport."

"Well, yes, but... I know, but..."

"Lilia...I knew it! There you are!"

Just as Cedric bursts into the room, Lilia grabs Serena's hand. By now, Serena's used to taking her hand and loaning her power. The magic circle for teleportation flares at their feet.

“I’ll be back, Cedric! I left you a note!”

“Th-that’s not the problem here! Why are you constantly doing things without telling me?! I’m your fiancé!”

Lilia has been waving at him in an easygoing way, but abruptly her faked smile softens. “I’m sorry. I’m the player, you see.”

As Cedric gulps, his face grows hazier. The next time she opens her eyes, they’ll be on the battlefield.

And this woman will probably wield the sacred sword. She’ll be the most like the Maid of the Sacred Sword she’s ever been.

High in the air, with both the ocean and the clouds visible below him, Auguste swings the holy sword Serena has augmented for him one more time.

His attack hits the palace. Just as he planned, the building and the floating island begin to tilt. A barrier still covers the entire palace, but if he’s managed to get it pointed in the right direction, that’s fine for now.

“All right. Shall we go find my wife and son?”

“Yes, Father.”

A figure appears in the air, high above the center of the palace. Aileen narrows her eyes, while Auguste and James turn their backs on her, shielding her and barring the figure’s way.

There’s only one thing she can say.

“Auguste. James. I’m counting on you.”

“Just leave it to us.”

“Walt, Kyle. Take care of Lady Aileen.”

“That’s the plan. Okay, sweet Ailey, we’re right on schedule. Let’s go.”

“Hurry.”

Aileen bites her lip. With Luciel leading her by the hand, she descends, alighting at the palace’s front entrance.

Then, without so much as a backward glance, she breaks into a run.

“Father, where is Master Claude?”

“Straight ahead; he’s back there. If the layout of this place is what it used to be, then he’s undoubtedly on the throne.”

“That’s right before the spot where Denis said the structure suggests there’s a hidden room. I’d prefer to avoid him if possible, but...”

Countless all-white soldiers line the spiral staircase and gallery that lead to the throne room. Rising lightly into the air, Luciel snaps his fingers. “Dolls, challenging a god?”

In an instant, the soldiers evaporate. Luciel gazes down into the gallery, which is supported by white pillars, and the sight of his eyes makes Aileen catch her breath.

They’re different colors: one red, the other violet.

“Father, your eyes...”

“The true form’s seal has been broken, and most of my divine power has come back. It’s not what it was in my prime, but I can use both magic and sacred power, even inside this barrier. —That goes for him, too, though.”

Luciel glances at the door that protects the throne room. As if on cue, it explodes outward. Shards of the door and walls and stairs and broken stone pillars fly at them, but Luciel repels them all with a barrier.

“You had one day left before your time ran out. Did you come to shorten your life on purpose?”

The voice echoes from the throne.

“Master...Claude...”

As he slowly rises to his feet, everything except the color of his hair is the same.

“On top of that, you’re not alone. What were you hoping to achieve by bringing my son’s wife?”

The way he speaks is different, though. So is the atmosphere he projects.

“And you, girl. You haven’t come to beg me to make you my mistress and

spare your life, have you?”

The eyes that look down on Aileen, the smile he wears. Those are different.

“Make me your mistress? Just listen to you! This from a failure of a husband who doesn’t even know his own wife.”

“...What was that?”

“Return my husband to me, all right? If you do, I’ll find your wife for you.”

Claude’s eyebrows twitch, but the corners of his lips promptly rise. “You’re an amusing woman. However, unfortunately, my son is no longer—”

The two guards appeared behind him, charging toward the throne. Claude vanishes, and the floor shatters and falls away.

“Would you refrain from making improper remarks?”

“Yeah, we’re the ones who have to deal with it afterward— Huh?!” A mass of magic hurtles toward Kyle and Walt, but Luciel stands in its path.

The floor of the throne room peels back, and the light is blinding. Taking the wind from the blast head-on, Aileen shouts, “Master Luciel! Is everyone all right—?”

“Sweet Ailey, behind you!”

She hears a light footfall. Claude has alighted behind her. Aileen whirls around, slamming the holy sword into him and driving him back a step, then makes magic explode right in front of him. It’s just a burst of light, to blind him. Grabbing her chance, she dashes to the throne and joins Luciel and the others, distancing herself from him.

“Are you all right, Father?”

“You just attacked my son without hesitating.”

“Master Claude would never fall to an attack as meager as mine!”

“Maybe not, but I wish you’d hesitate a little!”

“Ailey, look down.”

As she and Luciel squabble, Kyle quietly calls to her.

The throne has been shattered by Walt and Kyle's attack, and struck squarely by Claude's. Behind it, where only a high wall should be, there's a set of stairs that lead down.

"Is it...a hidden room?"

"Kind of a cliché, huh?"

As Aileen looks back, Walt stands in front of her, hiding her. Luciel peeks into the space. "It's filled with sacred power... I bet Claude couldn't find it because he's still the demon king."

A short distance away, Claude is shaking his head gently. Apparently he took that blinding attack full in the face: his brow is furrowed, and his eyes are still closed.

Without taking his eyes off Claude, Kyle says, "Ailey, you go. We're human, but since we've been reinforced with demon snuff, we're vulnerable to sacred power. We can't afford to have Master Luciel leave here. Besides, since you have the holy sword, you've got the best chances of getting through safely."

If she goes in there, the magic she's borrowed from Luciel is bound to vanish. However, against Claude, it's just a stopgap anyway.

Most importantly, if their guess about what's in there is correct...

"...Father."

"I'm counting on you. Find my wife."

That's all Luciel says, even though he has to be the one who most wants to check.

Aileen takes a deep breath, then dives down the stairs. For a moment, she feels as if she's passing through a membrane, but that's all.

Above her, an explosion roars, but the sacred power promptly blocks that as well, and the sound cuts out.

Please be the right answer!

After losing his wife, Luciel transformed into a dragon, and Amelia promptly slew him. Just before she did it, he'd made his oath, wishing to be reunited with

the human who had his wife's soul. However, Amelia learned of this and used it against him. She was able to do it because Grace's soul was already under her control.

Amelia used Grace's soul to rewrite the oath, casting herself as the destined lover.

That oath is still binding. In that case, the method for rewriting it—its core, Grace's trapped soul—has to be *somewhere*.

Please either let Grace's soul be here or let me find whatever's binding it.

If she breaks that and frees Grace's soul, even the true form is bound to come to its senses. It will be freed from the oath, the wish Amelia has rewritten.

There are no lights, but the floor gives off a pale glow, and the path is as straight as an arrow.

That's strange. No traps or obstacles?

Amelia's probably noticed that she's gotten in here. It wouldn't be odd for those white troops to show up, at the very least... And yet it's simply quiet. There may be some sort of illusion at work. Aileen bites her lip. She has to keep running, though.

Without the sacred sword, she can't tell whether there are any illusions or not — “Just now...”

Aileen blinks. It seems as if she's heard something.

It's a faint voice. It strikes her as familiar, but she doesn't know whose it is. She hasn't heard it often, but it's nostalgic, a lovely girl's voice. The sort that might belong to the heroine of an *otome* game...

“—Lady Sahra?!”

Aileen's voice echoes in the darkness. In response, a voice calls back to her from some untraceable location.

It isn't coming from farther down the shining white path. It's somewhere in the hollow darkness.

“...Over there, you mean?”

Aileen has no reason to believe in this. She barely even knows Sahra.

However, she does know that Serena's trying to save her.

She's watched this girl try to heal her shoulder through her own fear. She's seen her struggle desperately to keep that right hand from being retaken.

Most of all, she knows that a man who was hopelessly selfish has swallowed his shame and scraped his head on the floor, begging them to save her, and that Auguste forgave him.

As a result, she sets off, heels clicking, into that empty darkness.

Just as Aileen leaps down the stairs, the shock wave hits, passing over Luciel's head and snapping the pillars that support the wall. Fortunately, those pillars fall and block the entrance to the stairs.

Take care of my wife, daughter-in-law, he prays, then faces forward.

He has a shot at winning. Sure enough, Walt and Kyle have sensed that something's off, and they grimace.

"...What, he missed? Master Claude?"

"It would be a great help if he weren't in normal condition yet, but..."

"What happened to that woman?" Claude asks quietly, still facing them.

Slowly getting to his feet, Luciel laughs. "Is she on your mind?"

"...She is my son's wife technically. Even I have compassion."

"Yes, yes, that's right. I get it. We're the same, you and I."

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm sure of it now. You haven't completely suppressed Claude, have you?"

Walt and Kyle's eyes widen.

Luciel looks at his red-eyed son, who appears just the way he himself did as a god. "When Claude chose to destroy himself, you flinched, didn't you? It scared me, too."

"This is an important vessel. That's the only reason."

"Thanks to that, Claude got you back. That's why you can't attack Aileen."

Claude's face twists.

"I thought it was odd. You had the perfect chance to finish me off back then, and yet when Aileen appeared, that was all it took. You withdrew. If you were just going to demand that they hand me over later, you might as well have attacked her right along with me."

"....."

"It's not just Aileen. It's these guards, too. You've been pulling your punches for a while now. You could turn them to cinders instantly if that's what you wanted."

Walt and Kyle get sluggishly to their feet.

"He's like me... Like us. Claude staked his life and his magic to bind you with an oath."

Don't hurt my wife.

He won't allow his loved ones, the ones he wants to protect, the things he's gained, to be stolen away from him.

"If you break that oath, Claude will engulf you and reemerge. Serves you right."

"Listen to you blather. A relic of a bygone age who can do nothing but flee." Claude sneers coldly, narrowing his eyes. "An oath? Ridiculous. My spare could never bind me."

"He's not a spare; he's my son. Mine and my wife's— Look, how long are you planning to fool yourself?! That woman is not my wife!"

"Silence! You don't understand a thing!" Claude's eyes glitter red with anger, and his magic rises. "In that case, who was my wife? That woman tricked me. It's obvious! If she were my real wife—she wouldn't die. That thing couldn't possibly be my wife and you know it!"

Reduced to a severed head. Scorned as the Maid of the Cursed Sword. These things couldn't possibly happen. Therefore...

So she took advantage of that to switch the oath, huh?!

Even now, the pain is building, preparing to torture him again. Luciel clutches his chest, stifling it. “No! Listen, I’m sure my wife is—!”

“And I am telling you you’re wrong!!”

A tantrum of an attack demolishes the walls around them, brings down the ceiling, and reduces the throne to a pile of rubble.

Walt and Kyle, who’ve taken to the air, glare at the heart of the magic.

“Well, he’s not going to listen. That’s expected. What are we supposed to do with this?!”

“Rouse Claude’s mind! This situation goes against the oath; use it to make him wake up!”

The people Claude holds dear are the keys. Aileen would probably be best, but making the wrong decision would have sent him into a rage. That was why he chose these two, but...

“Tell me you’re not saying our deaths will revive Master Claude and solve everything!”

“Is—is that how it goes?! Wouldn’t just being in mortal danger be enough?!”

“We probably need to be prepared to die. This is Master Claude, after all!”

Even though they’re in the thick of battle, the two guards have begun to shout at each other in a weirdly mind-numbing way.

“He’d absolutely say we don’t think he’s worth dying for and start sulking! He’ll be able to take control, but he’ll refuse to do it. You know what he’s like!”

“But if we died, I think he’d complain we’d done it without his permission... So which is it?!”

“I’ve got it: We’ll declare that our employer is dead and we’re changing jobs!”

“Wait, tendering our resignation is a double-edged sword!”

“The strategy hasn’t changed! You two just have to guard me. I’m the one the true form’s after!” Hearing what others think of his son has left him extremely curious, but he can’t let them hesitate. “If I die, the true form will retake all of its divine power! If that happens, Claude’s oath will lose its meaning. If I die,

Claude's finished, too!"

"Enough talk."

The edge of a hand strikes the back of his neck like a blade. Before he can turn, arms wrap around his torso and throw him to the ground. Kyle has flown to his aid. Walt gets out in front to provide support, but Claude's magic knocks him out of the way.

"There's no way you can call this *holding back*— Whoa, wait, I'm gonna die. I mean it!"

Walt slams into a wall, and blades of magic fly at him. He apparently has enough spare energy to scream, though; he runs straight up a pillar and launches himself off the rubble, evading all the attacks.

Kyle, who's gotten to his feet, turns back to him. "Do you know anything else about this?!"

"We have to deal with him while the palace's barrier is up. At this point, the true form can only use magic-based attacks. If that barrier comes down, though, his magic will be far stronger and greater than mine!"

"So we're being saved by the enemy's barrier, and we only have until the palace falls to finish this fight!"

Threading his way through Claude's attacks, Walt lands beside them. "What do we do? These are definitely getting more powerful. Actually, I bet he's boosting the power on purpose; that's the kind of guy he is!"

"Calm down. Master Claude wouldn't do a thing like... Actually, he might, but I'd like to believe that he wouldn't."

"If he's starting to act like Claude, we're on the right track. The true form's pretty hotheaded, too."

It's essentially just a mass of magic and emotion.

Taking as irony the fact that it's also himself, Luciel laughs. "It would be good if we could get someone else over here, but I bet Elefas has his hands full already."

"Someone else... Someone Master Claude would hesitate to attack, besides

sweet Ailey and the demons...”

“We’ve got one who’s tailor-made for the job. I bet he’d commit double suicide with Master Claude with a smile, though.”

“For now, we need to do something about him ourselves— Here he comes!”

He thrusts out his right palm, and magic explodes beyond it. Pressure from the ferocious energy blasts the building apart.

This kind of power while he’s inside a sacred barrier... We have to hurry and wake up Claude’s mind, or else.

Walt and Kyle have circled around behind Claude’s back, but he pulls out two holy swords and slaps them down with the blades. Then Claude’s eyes turn Luciel’s way, and the two holy swords come flying straight at him. Luciel dodges one, grabs the other, and smiles. “Still not showing your dad even a shred of mercy? That’s pretty mean.”

My poor, wounded feelings, he thinks as the holy swords clash with the exact same motion, perfect mirror images of each other. The attack makes the floor sink, and fissures run through the exposed ground.

As if in response, there’s an explosion outside the barrier, and it starts to crack.

“Agh! You’re kidding me.”

Right in front of him, Claude flashes a grin that’s identical to his own. “Die, fool who can’t even call his wife’s name.”

“Master Luciel!”

His son’s precious guards are trying to reach him.

Luciel shields them from the explosion of magic, and the light incinerates his shadow.

Apparently, it’s possible to walk on sacred barriers. Auguste’s shoes slip on the curved barrier that surrounds the floating palace, and he catches his balance at the last moment.

“Hey, are you all right?”

“Mostly! James, watch out for that sacred sword! You’re half demon.”

“There’s no need to worry about that. Don’t let her overpower you.”

“It’s fine; I’m in fantastic shape. Maybe it’s thanks to Serena.”

For some reason, James—who’s grown wings—responds with an irritated *tsk*.

“Bringing the palace down to avoid an attack on Ellmeyer... Is that your plan? Ridiculous.” They’re keeping Amelia pinned. As the woman levels her swords, her face is as expressionless as ever. She’s fighting with two blades: the sacred sword in her right hand and a holy sword in her left. “An incompetent Holy Knight and a counterfeit demon king. This world doesn’t need failures who disobey destiny.”

With that, Amelia charges at them. When James tries to attack, she uses the sacred sword; if Auguste tries to block it, she switches to the holy sword.

Auguste doesn’t think his and James’s teamwork is at all inferior to Walt and Kyle’s, and those two have fought together for years. However, the woman fields them with unerring accuracy.

She’s tough, plain and simple.

It isn’t just because she has vast sacred power to use any way she pleases, or because she’s mastered the use of the sacred and the holy swords, or because her body feels no pain and doesn’t bleed when cut.

She’s worked hard.

The beautiful line of her sword, which permits no openings or wasted motion, is an eloquent testimony to that.

She has strength that seems impossible for her slender arms. Just how much time and effort did she put into gaining that power, this technique, so that she wouldn’t lose to her sister?

The holy swords clash. Amelia’s holy sword is a disposable, mass-produced one, while Auguste’s has been remade and strengthened by Serena. Amelia’s blade is gradually cracking. As she glances at it, Auguste speaks without thinking. “Listen, can’t you forgive your sister and brother-in-law?”

She lifts one of her eyebrows. That isn’t her true expression, though.

Based on what he heard, this is her sister's corpse.

"Pretending to be your sister, spending centuries on a scheme like this... It's just pointless."

"Pointless?"

"Yes! What's the point of winning this? Will it actually make you happy?!"

"That's the logic of someone who always loses."

"Is this any time to be chatting, you fool?!"

James circles behind Amelia and attacks. Even though her blade is locked with Auguste's, Amelia reacts with frightening speed. Switching to a two-handed grip, Auguste strikes her down.

"Did that do it?!"

"—James, behind you!"

He grabs James's arm, switching places with him. It's the sacred sword: He'll get by with lighter injuries than James would— But the next instant, what he was sure was the sacred sword morphs into the blade of the holy sword.

An illusion?!

"If you were given a sacred sword, you'd be a real problem."

He twists away reflexively, but she runs the holy sword into the center of his right arm. Gritting his teeth against the impact and the pain, he switches his holy sword to his left hand, striking at the woman's right hand as it releases the hilt of her blade.

He's aiming for something on her palm. The thing that shines in all the colors of the rainbow.

That spot is probably the core of whatever is moving this body, and his blade stabs right through it.

The woman's eyes go wide.

"Auguste! You'd better be alive!"

As he falls, James catches him, then sets him down on the sacred barrier.

Auguste is panting heavily, but his eyes open, then widen in astonishment. Following his gaze, James gulps.

Palm still impaled by the holy sword, the woman is laughing. “Striking a spot that hard to hit under these circumstances... Impressive.”

“...You can still move?”

“Yes, unfortunately for you. This hand allows me to use power from the one who isn’t me, that’s all... Don’t think I’m not annoyed, though. Neither this body nor what’s in this right hand are yours to damage.” Amelia is watching them, her eyes wide. “I stole these from my older sister. No one is allowed to hurt them but me.” Her face is expressionless. “You asked if I’d be happy. I can’t wait to see if you’re still able to ask that once you’re dead.”

Instinctively, his skin crawls. She’s going to kill him. It’s just a fact.

“Farewell, Holy Knight.”

“Oh, come on, she’s obviously happy. She’s the happiest she’s ever been!”

As that voice speaks, the holy sword that’s piercing Amelia’s right hand flares with light. Amelia immediately pulls the blade out and hurls it away, but its tip sketches a magic circle, and the shining sword that emerges from it—the sacred maiden’s sword—strikes at her.

“I mean, look how far she’s come. How could she not be enjoying herself?”

“Lilia Reinoise...! The saint, too!”

As Amelia screams, the sacred sword is knocked away, and distance opens up between them.

Auguste blinks. Registering the two newcomers, he finally manages to speak. “Serena! Why...?!”

“What do you mean, ‘Why’? —And you! What happened to your arm?!”

“Don’t pull that out carelessly; the blood loss will kill him. Listen, we’re going to supplement minimal first aid with magic. Help me,” James tells her, and Serena nods.

Bending down to look into Auguste’s face, Lilia gives a light laugh. “Sometimes

stopping partway through makes it worse, doesn't it?"

"Well..."

"Did fighting a woman make you uncomfortable? This always was a women's battle, though." Long hair streaming in the strong, high-altitude wind, Lilia turns to face Amelia. "In other words, men should stay out of it. That's fine, isn't it?"

"...Yes. At the very least, since you have the sacred sword, I imagine you'll have more spine."

"Oh, good. It's a shame I won't get to personally watch Lady Aileen's exploits, but I did want to pay you back for that favor."

"What favor might that be?"

With her back still turned, Lilia gets a better grip on the sacred sword. "You attacked Cedric."

Amelia fixes her with an oddly gentle gaze. Her fingers tighten around her own sacred sword. "Wasn't that your fault?"

"You're so right. Thanks to you, my eyes have been opened! —Die, you hag."

On top of the barrier, the sacred swords clash. The clouds are blown away, and silvery light explodes in the bright blue sky.

Even at a distance, Baal can clearly sense the change in the enormous barrier. His eyes narrow. *The barrier around the palace is stretched to the limit. Now then, how will that affect the battle?*

The mage will regain his magic, but the demon king's magic will be at full power as well. Baal could take care of that if he were there, but this uninhabited desert that overlooks the ocean at his kingdom's border is as far as he can go.

If he interferes any further, he'll have lost his insurance in the event that Ellmeyer loses.

As excuses went, it was quite a stretch to claim that an unfortunate accident was going to cause the floating palace to fall on Ashmael, so he'd deal with it. Even domestically, there was opposition to Baal going in person. The story was so shameless that at first even he intended to reject it.

However, his beloved principal consort just happened to be present when the message came through, and she responded without turning a hair.

“‘It’s going to fall on us, so we have no alternative,’ hmm...? We’re no match for her.”

“Defending the kingdom is the holy king’s job. You’d best be going,” Roxane said impassively. She was well aware of what Baal actually wanted to do.

“We thought the woman would be a bit harder on us. We suspect we’re being spoiled.” For that very reason, he crosses his arms, telling himself this is as far as he goes. “She even silenced the retainers who were determined not to let us go. You gave us a good woman, Ares. On that point alone, you have our gratitude.”

Imperial Ellmeyer has sent him reinforcements in the form of a hostage. Baal glances at the holy general, who’s dragging his left leg. Ares seems uncomfortable; he averts his gaze, responding brusquely. “...She probably just doesn’t care whether you die or not. She’s a cold woman.”

“What’s this? Are you holding a grudge because when Ellmeyer’s crafty counselor said, ‘Here, take this,’ and handed you over, Roxane instantly told him, ‘We don’t need it’? Ha-ha-ha! Serves you right.”

“Are you a child?”

“How rude. We’re going to be a father soon.”

“—Y-you’re telling me she’s pregnant?! Roxane?!”

Ares’s shocked look is surprisingly gratifying.

Baal snorts. “Is there something wrong with the holy king’s principal consort carrying his child?”

“N-no... I was just startled is all.”

“Anyway, that’s what we told our retainers to make them shut up. We aren’t sure she should have made others tell the same story about themselves, but... The fools are easily blinded by power, and they’re busy thinking about which consort’s child to back.”

If they find out we’ve lied, they’ll execute all of us, so keep it in mind.

As a way to encourage someone to come home, Baal does think that was a bit much. Most of all, he isn't happy with the way she'd sighed and said, "If you'd hurry up and actually father a child, we wouldn't have had to take this risk." She isn't wrong, though. He'll have to survive so he can talk it over with her.

"Then you mean...you still haven't..."

"We'll come back alive and make Roxane's story true. Only hers, though."

"....."

"Hmph. Even if you want to apologize, we refuse to let you see Roxane now. If you and Sahra aren't useful to us, we won't even let you enter Ashmael."

Startled, Ares looks up. Baal looks straight back at him. "We hear we're the only one who can make that left leg of yours work. Give this your best."

"...As always, you're terribly naive."

"Not true. We just want Roxane to consider us tolerant!"

Ares's eyes widen. Then he gives a wry smile, as though he's reminiscing about something. "I...see. I was like that, too. Sahra often praised you, saying that you were a splendid king. She said I was amazing, too, for protecting you."

"In that case, what you did was foolish."

"Yes, you're right... I really was a fool." Even with his lame leg, Ares kneels on the spot and bows his head. Baal looks down at him. "I will protect you with my life, Holy King. Just as my wife wished me to."

"In that case, we suppose we could go on believing in you... Have your sword at the ready. The demon king is strong."

While it's only the size of a pea at this point, the floating palace from which the Queendom of Hausel is threatening the world has finally come into view. Baal rises lightly into the air. While he's at it, he pours a little holy power into the sacred stones in Ares's left leg. This seems to make things easier for Ares, and he blinks, but his face promptly turns grim. "King Baal, the palace is heading for—!"

"Hey, counselor! Can you hear us?! What's happening? The palace isn't going where it's supposed to!"

“I know that! Lilia Reinoise went in without permission and—”

There’s an odd noise, as if something has snapped, and the voice from the ring cuts out.

He can see why.

In the distance, a white dragon is climbing into the sky above the palace.

This is a development they predicted. The counselor prefaced it with the term “worst-case scenario.”

“The god has revived...?!”

Lilia has three sacred swords: one each from the Marcus, the Julian, and the Gilbert routes. A sacred sword for each love interest.

She swings the Gilbert route’s sword with all her might, but the woman evaporates it in no time. She hasn’t stolen it, though.

Two left!

As Lilia immediately draws the sacred sword from Julian’s route, Amelia’s eyes widen. She seems to be used to unexpected developments, though. She repels the blade, and the way she moves betrays no confusion.

“You’re not going to eat my sacred sword?”

“There’s no point in taking in a half-formed one.”

But she also called Aileen’s sacred sword half-formed, and she happily took that. She trapped Cedric in a crystal and tried to kill him.

Because of that, Lilia has no doubt.

The woman took that particular sacred sword *because it was the one from Cedric’s route.*

It had the best chance of becoming the real thing! That’s why!

After only three clashes, the Julian route sword begins to chip away.

Both Lilia and Amelia have fulfilled the game’s conditions for manifesting the sacred sword, but their power is different. *Think of the reason, figure out what’s different, then get a real sacred sword—* Almost nothing is this much fun to

think about!

“Is that sacred sword real?”

“Of course.”

“Was Grace’s sword a fake, then? It wasn’t, was it? Hers has to have been genuine, too. If not, you wouldn’t have gotten so defensive about claiming to be real. That means *the game’s conditions are no more than the conditions for manifesting the sacred sword!*”

“What are you babbling about?”

“You’re a failed heroine, the only one who didn’t land her hero, and yet you’ve become an unprecedented character. I’ll compliment you on that, at least! The sacred sword can’t harm humans. I never thought I’d get to see one that had shattered that limit!” The sword from Julian’s route disintegrates, leaving her empty-handed, but she doesn’t stop laughing. “Come on, we need to check our answers about the conditions for the real sacred sword! What do you suppose was different between you, Grace, and me?!”

Amelia narrows her eyes, thrusting mercilessly at her heart, but Lilia blocks with the sword from the Marcus route.

“Girl, you have yet another sacred sword?!”

“I sure do! And if I’m right about the answer, this one should last quite a while!”

Planting her feet on the sacred barrier, she swings the sword down with all her might. For the first time, Amelia grimaces.

“Listen,” Lilia says, “while we’re at it, I have a question. What happened to the love interests besides Luciel? Weren’t they around?! Your fellow student Richard, for example, and Keyneth, who came on exchange from a foreign land!”

“...How do you know that?!”

“So they *were* there? But on both the Queen route and the Maid of the Sacred Sword route, the only target is Luciel. Besides, as desperate as you were to raise your parameters, I guess you didn’t have the time to look at anyone

else, huh? That's too bad. At any rate, Grace was a complete irregularity. After all, she took Luciel from you! That made two sacred swords manifest, and so a correction was applied to the swords' specs. Now listen, this bit's important."

"Be quiet! No matter how many sacred swords you have, they're all counterfeits!"

"Gracious, I'm sorry. Yes, you really and truly did love Luciel, didn't you!"

"Sileeeeeence!!"

Amelia swings her sacred sword. The rush of wind that accompanies the stroke sends Lilia flying, and she goes sliding across the sacred barrier on her back. However, unlike the others, the sacred sword from the Marcus route is still going strong. She can't stop grinning about that. Serena peeks into her face.

"Hey, are you okay?! You're bleeding."

"Huh? What do you mean? This is so much fun!"

"'Fun,' she says..."

Serena grimaces. Behind her, Auguste has bound a holy sword to his left arm. There's blood spattered all around him; he must have pulled the sword out of his other arm, but it isn't bleeding. Working together, James's magic and Serena's power have stanching the blood and numbed the pain. For now, he'll be able to continue fighting.

After all, even Sahra has a hard time healing wounds inflicted by the holy sword or sacred power.

Even if Serena's augmented it, this is the best a cambion's magic can do.

"Auguste, don't get in the way, all right?"

"Huh? But on your own, you'll—"

"You know you can't fight properly with that arm. Besides, even if they're reinforced, holy swords are inferior copies of the sacred sword. Never mind that; protect Serena, like a Holy Knight should. You too, James! Serena's a key character."

"...What are you planning?"

“I’m going to verify my theory.”

Lilia chuckles, her cheeks flushed. Both Auguste and James’s expressions are a sight to behold, but Serena glares at her. “I knew it! You’re—”

Lilia shoves Serena back toward Auguste, then blocks Amelia’s sword as the woman attacks from the sky. The sacred barrier can’t handle the clash of holy power; with an audible crack, it begins to crumble under their feet.

“You’re going to break the barrier, you know. Are we close to the limit? Come on, let me see the real you soon. I haven’t made sure your face is the same as the one in the still images yet!”

“You aren’t making any sense...!”

“I suppose I’ll have to clear that body away first.”

The thought that this is Grace’s corpse makes it feel like a waste, but it really is only a corpse. Even if her soul is released, it won’t come back to life. It’s just a bloodless, lifeless body.

“All right, Mother, prepare yourself. I absolutely loathe Game 4’s Queen ending. I have no intention of inheriting your power and becoming the queen of Hausel.”

“...How did you know about that?”

In the Queen ending of Game 4, Amelia abdicates because she’s found a suitable successor. In addition, while the fan disc shows that Lilia is engaged to Cedric, it doesn’t say that she’s become the empress of Ellmeyer.

It isn’t clear when the Queen ending is set. However, in this era, Lilia is the one who’s best suited to be the queen’s successor. She’s the Maid of the Sacred Sword, able to provide aid if she hears of demons posing a threat, and on top of that, she’s the queen’s daughter. For the sake of world peace, and to save her mother, she’d naturally become the queen of Hausel.

“‘She’s actually a baron’s daughter who snags herself a prince, and she’s also the queen of this other country.’ I assume they thought building her up that much would make the fans happy, but you can’t just pile on everything but the kitchen sink like that. How did it go again...? ‘You may count on me. The world

will be fine,’ wasn’t it?”

“Why do you know what that prophetic dream foretold?”

“Oh, I don’t know, maybe because I’m your daughter?”

The sacred sword from Marcus’s route is starting to have just a little trouble. Still, it’s held out very well. *Thank you*, she thinks. After Cedric lost his position as crown prince, Marcus chose to be his knight rather than Lilia’s. She thought that was very gallant, and she liked him for it.

“That’s not even funny. Who wants to clean up after her mother in an *otome* game, too?”

“...I’ve revised my opinion. I’d expect no less of my daughter. You are indeed the Maid of the Sacred Sword. —And too dangerous. Begone!”

“You’ve taken the words right out of my mouth, Motherrrrr!”

She’s slashed upward with her sacred sword, but it shatters. Beyond the scattering shards, Amelia smirks. Lilia had seen this coming, though.

With no hesitation, she thrusts her hand out, reaching for the core of the other woman’s body.

She’s going to find the sacred sword inside her, just as the woman did to Sahra.

“Why, you— What do you think you’re doing?! You were only ever my spare, and you dare to—!!”

With Lilia’s hand buried in her stomach, Amelia raises the sacred sword over her head.

The sacred sword. The regalia of maidens—their love—which passes judgment on both saints and demons.

Its tip bites into Lilia’s left shoulder. The heat that sears its way through her from left to right and shoulder to waist makes her smile.

—*Found it!*

Draw it out. You are the player.

The player who’s able to make the sacred sword in her grasp the real thing,

and knows it.

She is the player, and she can make Aileen, her chosen protagonist, win.

“Take that! Looks like you got careless, huh, you filthy haaaaag!!”

Ignoring the fact that she’s being cut, she closes her hand around the real sacred sword and yanks it sideways. Caught in the middle of slashing Lilia, Amelia’s—or rather Grace’s—body is cut in two at the waist, then flies apart.

Lilia watches it happen as she falls, and the corners of her lips curve. However, at the sight of the figure beyond the smoke, her violet eyes widen.

Eyes the same color as her own are targeting her.

No doubt Amelia can tell at a glance: The sacred sword from Cedric’s route, the one in Lilia’s hands, is now the real thing.

In that case, if she wants to ensure that Lilia can never use her complete sacred sword to defeat her, she’ll need to— “Serena!”

There’s no way the cambion final boss or a wounded Holy Knight with no sacred sword could stand against the real Maid of the Sacred Sword.

The thought occurs to her only after she’s used herself to shield them.

“...Lilia! You just— Why?!”

The blade pierces her stomach, her arms, but it feels like it’s happening to someone else.

That’s right. She is the player. To her, death and even love are merely conditions for clearing the game.

“This is...an *otome* game, after all... Love is...the real condition...”

“What are you t-talking ab—? Why? Why did you protect me? J-just wait, I’ll —”

Lilia nearly falls to her knees but manages to prop herself up with the sacred sword. She spits out blood and suddenly finds it easier to talk.

“This isn’t...a thing...you can heal.”

“What are you saying—? Are you stupid?!”

“Never mind...that. Take...this, please.”

The only thing that matters are the fingertips that touch Serena's outstretched hand.

That must have been enough to show her. Serena's eyes fly open. The things that scatter from their corners can't be tears, can they?

“Run. Hurry...to, Lady Aileen... Hee-hee! Just like...the game. But don't...get it wrong. Tell her...to steal it back... Because I might...be dead...”

“Excuse me, what?! There you go again with the—”

“Make it stronger. You can, can't you? It's...the real sacred sword... The proof of...the Maid's love...”

Serena shakes her head. The scattering stuff really is tears.

What a dumb character. She's only a character, but the fact that the player is leaving hurts her?

“—Game 2 hero and final boss, take her and go! She's your heroine!!” she shouts.

As if that's brought them to their senses, Auguste pulls Serena into his arms, and James flies off, carrying both of them.

Serena's screaming something. Even so, she's holding on tightly to what Lilia's placed in her hands.

Oh, that was an excellent game.

Holding her bleeding stomach, Lilia uses the sacred sword to push herself to her feet.

If Aileen manages to win now, it will mean Lilia read the situation correctly, and that will make it her win as well.

A silver streak is coming to finish her off, and Lilia turns to meet it.

For a brief moment, she sees the Maid of the Sacred Sword just as she was in the game's art. It's a showdown between the former and the current Maids.

She has no regrets. That said, the thought that the sacred sword she's reclaimed is going to lose frustrates her a little.

Even though it is the real thing, Cedric.

But she is the player. She's decided to stay the player to the very end.

I won't end as the mere heroine who loved you.



All right, smile. Just as Aileen has always done, she'll never let her opponent feel the slightest bit superior!

"Win this, okay, Lady Aileen? If you do..."

Even after her heart has been run through, her victory is unshakable.

She can't tell how much time has passed. She doesn't think it's been all that long, but after what happened the other day, she can't be sure.

Please, let me reach them quickly— Lady Grace! Lady Sahra!

Abruptly, she slams into an invisible wall, face-first. Putting a hand to her aching face, Aileen gingerly touches what looks like empty air.

There really is a wall there.

"Lady Sahra's voice is coming from beyond it. But as things stand..."

There must be some sort of mechanism. However, without the sacred sword, she can't— Feeling herself begin to lose heart, she shakes her head. *Calm down. Can't you think of anything? Under the Queendom of Hausel... Hidden...*

"—That's it: the shrine used in the queen's succession ritual! In that case, if I recall, let's see... Reciting a spell is all that's required, I think."

"Hear, O past. Open, O future. I am the maiden who inherits the regalia of saints and demons," and so on!

Lilia's words rise in her mind. Was it only coincidence that she said them?

Did Lady Lilia reach the same conclusion as I have? Or, no, had she read even further? Was she trying to avert the Queen ending...?

For some reason, an uneasy feeling comes over Aileen. Mentally switching gears, she closes her eyes. She has no time to shrink from bad premonitions.

"Hear, O past. Open, O future. I am the maiden who inherits the regalia of saints and demons."

A bell peals, quite loudly. Her vision immediately clears, and she blinks.

It opened. It really is the shrine...

She starts across the stone-flagged floor, her footfalls echoing against the

high ceiling. Water cascades from such a height that she can't see its source, even when she looks straight up. The waterfall forms two curtains that adorn the sides of the passage.

A short distance ahead, she sees the altar. Five steps lead up to a platform draped with velvet. On it lies a sleeping girl, her hands folded below her bosom.

She recognizes that face. She's seen it in game art.

"Amelia Dark...!"

Aileen rushes to her, then frowns. An old sword pierces the girl's body.

"Is this...a sacred sword?"

Amelia's impaled chest rises and falls faintly. Her complexion is still good. She's alive.

"But whose...?"

She brushes rust from the hilt. Then her fingertips touch something, and her eyes widen. One long black hair tangles around her fingers, then falls away.

"Lady Grace's..."

In that case, this is the key that will free Grace's soul.

Aileen grips the hilt. Then, slowly, she pulls out the sword.

Both the hilt and the blade are badly rusted, but the part that has been inside Amelia's chest is clean. Even in this sunless subterranean space, it hasn't lost its luster. She nearly gasps in wonder, but then it starts to glow in earnest.

"Huh? Wha...what—?!"

"Hurry, run!"

A voice echoes in her mind. Before she can ask it any questions, the sword moves on its own. It drags her away, sending her tumbling down the steps. Then light explodes from the altar in all directions.

What, what?! Have I resurrected something?!

Amelia's body rises into the air, slowly rotating to hang vertically. Her eyes snap open, and then she vanishes.

“...Wh-what on earth was that? It can’t be... Wait, this is glowing, too!”

Aileen is still holding the sacred sword, and the rust is flaking away, dissolving into particles of light.

“Huh?! It’s vanishing... Wait just a minute, is this all right?!”

“Th-that’s not it; it’s teleportation. Part of the soul is fused with that body, so it’s being dragged along.”

“And just who has been speaking in my mind? Don’t tell me— Lady Sahra?”

“Yes,” the voice says. This time, the particles of light settle on her and begin to sparkle.

“Listen, what is all this?! I don’t understand any of it!”

“Um, she did say to hurry. Oh, sh-she says she’ll send me home properly, too, so don’t worry.”

“Don’t tell me I’m being teleported! Where to?!”

“I—I don’t know, I’m sorry... Oh, but, um, she said she’s counting on you.”

“Who said?! Speak plainly and clearly, if you would!”

“Um, um, she says to please set her little sister free. If you do, you’ll be able to meet her.”

“Tell me important things like that first!”

With one final, pitiful *“I’m sorrryyy,”* the voice in her mind recedes. At the same time, her vision turns pure white.

Set her little sister free... Then it’s as I thought: Lady Grace’s soul was in that sacred sword. Don’t tell me I’m being teleported to the past again! We don’t have time for this!

Wind caresses her cheeks. With a jolt, Aileen opens her eyes, then screams, “Not again!!”

Why does she end up falling from the upper atmosphere so frequently? She can see the palace below her, so the location and era are correct, but the altitude is very bad news.

Still, she promptly registers that something is different, and her eyes widen. The sky—the very air—is heavy. In addition, the barrier that had covered the palace is broken. The indescribable, lukewarm wind carries the scent of blood to her.

“Well, well. Look what’s fallen out of the sky.”

Someone scoops her up lightly. Aileen blinks. “Master Clau...”

“And now I’ve finished taking out the trash.”

The man breaks into a cruel smile, and Aileen shoves him away from her. Fortunately, they aren’t very far off the ground at that point.

Has she landed in a garden? But most of the plants have been burned, then buried under rubble. It’s in far worse shape than any abandoned garden.

“Don’t wander around without permission,” Claude says above her. Ignoring him, she breaks into a run. They’d been fighting in the throne room. In that case, somewhere near here— She turns a corner, then shrieks.

“Walt, Kyle... Master Luciel!”

Luciel is lying on top of the blasted rubble, with Walt and Kyle under him.

Aileen has stopped in her tracks. Behind her, Claude lands with a light thump. “They’re not dead.” As long as they didn’t die, everything’s fine.

“Ai...leen...?”

“Master Luciel!”

“No you don’t.” As Aileen starts to run toward them, Claude catches her by the waist and pulls her to him. “You’re the only one who’s off-limits. If I so much as scratch you, my son will raise hell. I’ll keep you very, very carefully, like a pet. I’m sure that will satisfy him.”

She raises her hand to slap him, but he catches it. He may smile bewitchingly with an identical face, but this man is someone else.

“I will immediately divorce any man who says a thing like that!!”

For a moment, his grip loosens, and Aileen frees herself. She looks at Luciel, who’s managed to get up somehow; she also sees Walt, who’s panting,

shoulders heaving; and then there's Kyle, who's struggling to rise to his feet.

"Good! You're all alive?!"

"Yes, but we're...pretty much...at our limit...!"

"Pull yourself together! Father, I've found Lady Grace!"

Luciel's head comes up; his eyes are round. Gazing right into his face, Aileen goes on, "However, it's likely that we'll have to deal with Lady Amelia before—Excuse me?!"

In midsentence, she rises lightly into the air. It's Claude's magic. He walks over and catches her with one arm, trapping her again. "Good grief, is my son delicate or something? My whole body froze up for a moment."

"No, he's probably, furious...because sweet Ailey...brought up...divorce." Back on their feet, Walt and Kyle smile with dirty, blood-caked faces.

"Give him...more of that, Ailey... The sort of...stuff that will...make Master Claude...mad..."

"Right. If you do, Claude will—!!"

"Master Luciel!"

The sole of Claude's shoe comes down on Luciel's head, sinking him into the rubble.

"Be quiet, all right? If you do anything uncalled for, I'll kill this man."

".....!"

"Ha! You're planning to kill me anyway," Luciel retorts from under his boot. He strains to get up, pushing with both hands. Gazing down at him as if the sight is unpleasant, Claude raises his foot and stomps on his head again. "In that case, I'll inflict so much pain on those guards, they'll wish they were dead."

"Don't! Listen to me, your wife is alive—"

Before Aileen has finished speaking, he covers her mouth, then picks her up.

"Be silent. I won't be fooled twice. I won't. I'll never be fooled again."

Claude's red eyes are wide open, and he repeats himself like a doll. It's as if

he's under a spell.

I see... Unless we do something about Lady Amelia, the oath won't release him!

"...Aileen. Is it all right...to believe...what you said?"

Luciel has grabbed Claude's ankle and is struggling to get up. Aileen's eyes focus on him, and for just a moment, she's able to see his face.

It's a weak smile, something very unlike a god: He looks happy, afraid, and on the verge of tears, all at once. "Was my wife...really there?"

"More nonsense—!"

When she tries to kick him, Claude grimaces. At the same time, Walt and Kyle spring at him. *Tsking*, Claude releases Aileen and retreats, putting distance between them.

Luciel has thrown his arms around Aileen, and she nods. "Yes, she was. It was Lady Grace. I haven't met her directly, but I'm sure of it."

"I see... I see. Yes, I see... That's good. In that case, I'll have faith and give Claude back to you."

"Father?"

He gives her a smile so kind and soft that it looks incongruous under the circumstances. She blinks. However, with pensive eyes, Luciel turns away to face Claude— To face himself. "You were right. I'm a coward shaped by my refusal to see my wife's death. The burden of the oath also rests entirely on you. If you take me into yourself, you'll probably become a god who can do everything over in accordance with the oath."

"Why are you saying this now? We're both well aware of it."

"But if I take you into myself, I'll revert to who I was before the oath affected me. I won't even be able to use the oath to fool myself. I'll be a monster who lost his wife, then lost himself to anger and could do nothing but rampage."

Overawed by the other man's tranquil eyes, Claude takes a step back.

As if pursuing him, Luciel takes a step forward. "Claude, I'm sorry. I was a

failure of a father from start to finish.”

“What...are you... What are you trying to do?!”

“But I’m sure you’ll be fine. Your wife is strong, and you have lots of people helping you. You’re bound to be all right. You’re probably as kind as your wife, so I’ll say this in advance: You don’t have to go easy on me. You don’t have to seal me. Killing your father is standard in myths.”

“Father, what are you doing?!” Aileen screams.

Luciel doesn’t look back. “Take care of Claude.”

Claude’s face twists, and he thrusts an arm out in front of him. However, before his hand can unleash magic, Luciel calls a name. “Grace.”

The name of his real wife.

“Grace. I miss you. I miss you so much. Oh, I remember. Yes, you...you went to see your sister. You said you’d be back before I knew it—but only your head came back to me.”

“D-don’t.”

“Why is it? I’m a god, so why am I embracing your head?”

He speaks as if he were reciting a poem. A soft sound, like cracking glass, blends with his voice. The noise is coming from his neck.

The spell that keeps him from merging with the true form is unraveling.

“I want to see you, Grace.”

Luciel gazes up at the sky, tears slipping from his wide-open eyes.

Claude shakes his head, clutching it with his hands. “Stop, stop, stop. Don’t call that name. That woman is—”

“Grace.”

Luciel advances, and Claude backs away, fleeing from him. “No, that can’t be right. She can’t be gone. I won’t allow it.”

“Grace. My one and only love.”

“D-don’t—”

“Tell me, Grace. What am I supposed to do?”

“Stoooooooooop!!”

“A world without you...”

...should be destroyed.

Luciel’s and Claude’s shadows merge, and a vortex of magic explodes from them both. A jet-black pillar punches straight up into the sky, engulfing the two of them.

Fierce winds sketch a spiral, sweeping everything in. Thunder rumbles, warning of a storm, and the blue sky turns black.

Bracing herself against the gale that batters her, Aileen shouts, “Master Claude!”

Claude had been blasted into the sky with Luciel, and now he’s plummeting toward her. Aileen hastily rises to catch him, but Walt and Kyle stop her.

“You can’t! Master Claude is heavier than he looks!”

“I know, he’s lain on top of me before!”

“Oh, I wish I hadn’t heard that...”

“Never mind that! If we simply stand here, Master Claude will crash into the ground! We must catch him.”

“I told you, Ailey, you can’t. Let us—”

Abruptly, Kyle falters. As she’s wondering what’s happened, a shadow descends from overhead, then lightly embraces her from behind.

The long hair that spills over her shoulder is black.

“Catch me, Aileen.”

“.....”

She’s so furious that she considers slapping him.

However, if she unclenches her fists, she fears she may burst into tears.

“Aileen? Are you angry?”

“.....”

“I’m sorry. I am back, though. Won’t you show me your lovely face?”

He’s probably well aware that Aileen is angry and that she’s on the verge of tears.

“I love you, my sweet Aileen.”

And come to think of it, of the fact that Aileen will end up stifling those things.

“—! For now— I will refrain from slapping you!”

She gets the feeling he’s laughing at her. “I see. Well, it’s hardly the time for that anyway.”

“That... That’s right, where’s Master Luciel?!”

“There.” Claude points upward.

She looks up. Even though it’s noon, the sky is pitch black. Out of that dark sky, slowly, a shining dragon’s tail descends. Then its legs...its wings...

It’s even larger than Claude was during his rampage at the old castle. Pale silver scales gleam, and both magic and sacred power race, crackling audibly.

Its eyes open. One is red, the other violet.

The mark of a god who’s transcended the sacred and demonic.

“The divine dragon...”

Every human present breaks out in goose bumps. Ignoring them, the divine dragon—Luciel—opens his mouth. The flash that emerges slices both the palace and its island in two and parts the sea.

“.....!”

The attack is so far beyond anything before it that Aileen can’t even scream. Worse, she has the feeling the attack traveled as far as Ashmael, which is visible on the far side of the ocean—

“But I’m sure I only imagined it!”

“You wish, woman! What in blazes was that?! Even we thought we might die! Is this actually a plot to destroy Ashmael?!”

Baal's angry shout erupts from the sacred stone Walt is carrying. That attack has completely demolished the barrier around the palace, so there's no need to worry about being overheard.

"And is that an albino fiend dragon up there?! No, it's clearly bigger than the fiend dragon and blatantly bad news, but we don't want to believe it. Is this a dream?!"

"What, the holy king's here, too?" Claude says, resting his chin on top of Aileen's head. At the sound of his voice, the sacred stone falls silent. "That's perfect. Let's have him help."

"That voice... No, hold it, we refuse, we have a really bad feeling about this. We only promised we'd stop the floating palace from falling on us, since we had very little choice in the matter."

"All right. Walt, Kyle, follow me. Let's drop that divine dragon on Ashmael, too."

"What in the—?!"

"This is a disaster. Who'd have thought the divine dragon would fall on Ashmael along with the palace? My friend is there, though. I have to go save him."

"Don't screw with us! We're not your friend anymore; we quit right now! We have our position to consider— And what's a 'divine dragon' anyway? Hey! Answer us nooow!"

Snatching the sacred stone from Walt's hand, Claude pitches it magnificently, and Baal's voice sinks into the ocean.

Aileen puts a hand to her cheek, quite touched. "I'm so glad you've made such a good friend."

"Absolutely. I'll take on my so-called father, then. You do something about Mother. If she's there, even the divine dragon should settle down."

As Aileen nods, the dragon begins to move. Claude glances at it, then turns back to Aileen. "You should be able to use my magic. You'll be able to summon demons as well. The palace may have split in two, but as long as the divine

items that keep it buoyant are intact, it should stay in the air. Just don't do anything reckless."

"All right."

"I'll be back, my dearest Aileen."

Before she can tell him to take care, he's stopped her lips with a kiss.

While she's blushing at the sight of his mischievous smile, Claude rises into the air, taking Walt and Kyle with him. "We'll continue that later."

For a moment, she considers telling him it's already been a week since the Foundation Festival, but she decides against it. Her brilliant lady-in-waiting and his adviser have taught her that when one's husband is feeling motivated, one mustn't dampen his enthusiasm.

"Take care."

As she watches the three figures fly away, Aileen sighs. "All right. First, I'll ask James where Lady Amelia has—"

"What is the meaning of this?"

The voice comes from the direction opposite the one Claude has flown in. She turns, looking up—and what she sees makes her back away involuntarily.

"Lady...Lilia...?"

Amelia Dark, the same girl she's just seen on the altar, is there—and so is a motionless Lilia, her chest run through by the sacred sword.

Sahra wakes with a start. She's panting heavily, gasping for air as if she's been underwater all this time; she tries to move, but something stops her. Someone's there. Her hazy eyes find their shape, and she screams, "T-take me... to them..."

"...You mustn't move. You've been asleep a long time."

"I—I...know... I have to go quickly...!"

The world still reels unsteadily, but it's gradually coming into focus. She's looking at a man who's wearing an eye patch. She doesn't recognize him, but she doesn't have time to be fearful.

“P-please, take...me there. To where...they’re all...fighting...!”

“...Where?” The man gazes quietly back at Sahra. He’s the type who listens properly.

“I—I am...the Daughter of God... I’ll...be useful, so...”

“...You’re not well.”

“But I must go. Lilia has no time!”

“—Lilia?” says someone else.

The speaker is apparently sitting on the other side of the screen. When she sees his face, she gulps. She recognizes this man.

“P-Prince Cedric...”

“Did you say Lilia just now? What’s the matter? What’s happened to her?”

Through her confusion, she pieces together the memories she’s found. Cedric had mentioned having a fiancée named Lilia. He meant the one she knows.

In that case, she really can’t just leave things as they are.

“Tell me. In the letter she left, she wrote some...strange things. She said that if she obtained the real sacred sword, it would be proof that she...loves me.” With a distorted smile, in a voice that’s trembling a little, he relates a confession of love. “And so, if she came back a-alive, she wanted me to marry her... It was almost as if...”

As if she were going off to die.

Swallowing what wells up from the depths of her throat, the frightening sight from her dream, and everything else, Sahra pleads with the man who seems most likely to understand the situation. “Please, please take me to them! I want to save her! Please!”

With Sahra and Cedric both watching him, the man with the eye patch thinks hard. “...There’s just one thing that might...get you to that palace quickly, right now.”

Getting to his feet, he sets off. Hastily, Sahra rises to follow him, then staggers. Cedric supports her.

Their destination isn't as far as she thought it might be. The man with the eye patch opens the door of a room that smells strongly of disinfectant and speaks to a man in a white coat.

A doctor?

"...The Daughter of God is awake."

"Oh— You startled me. She still needs to rest, though."

"...She says she wants to join Aileen and the others."

Sahra, who's entered the room, notices a figure lying on the bed.

"Huh? Well, she can't. Besides, the only demons still here are young ones who aren't suited to fighting or traveling."

"...There's one person. Someone who can issue orders to demons we can't ask for favors."

Seeing the two men glance at the person on the bed, Sahra turns. "C-could this man ask the demons to help?!"

"...It's possible."

"I don't know whether he'd agree to do it, though. Why are we even talking about this? The rubbish prince is here, too... Wait, don't—"

"I'll heal him."

She approaches the bed on unsteady feet. Getting her breathing under control, she looks him over quickly—but sees no wounds.

"He isn't injured?"

"That's right. The wound has closed. He's not out of the woods yet, but he'll live."

"That's...amazing. Being able to heal without sacred power..." She's honestly impressed.

The doctor in a white coat frowns slightly, then crosses his arms. "He won't wake up, though. It's possible that his wounds weren't the cause."

She takes a slow, careful look at him. Then she sees it. "...His soul. It's been

sealed.”

“Beg pardon?”

“Oh, um. It’s as if his soul has been locked away, so it won’t return to his body. Still, this is incredible. It wouldn’t be at all strange for this man to be long dead, and yet...”

He’s fighting to come back. A soul that’s unable to return to its vessel will die, though. Pursing her lips, Sahra closes her eyes, clasping her hands in front of her chest. *Break the seal. In that case, what about...?!*

There’s a light crack, as if a pane of glass had broken. It’s probably only in Sahra’s mind. However, as she slowly opens her eyes, the eyelids of the man on the bed flicker.

“...Is he...awake?”

“Wh-where...?”

When he hears that hoarse voice, the doctor hastily grabs his wrist.

“Keith. It’s me. Do you recognize me? Quartz, water.”

“I...do recognize you. Oh...finally. Good grief, I had...such awful dreams...”

The doctor helps the man sit up. Taking a swallow of water, he lets out a long breath.

“The demons tore up the nice new curtains, Bel smashed the windows, my master wandered off and disappeared... And when I tried to chase them around and scold them, I’d always get killed. What sort of dream is that? I’m tired of coming back to life and chasing others around and scolding them. If that was real, I refuse to tolerate that sort of violence.”

“...I think it was a dream, but...”

“U-um, may I ask a favor? There’s a place I’d like you to take me. They said you would...!”

There’s a cracked pair of glasses sitting on a little cupboard by the bed. The man picks them up, puts them on, and gives Sahra a long look. Then, slowly, he smiles.

“For now, could I trouble you for an explanation about what’s going on?”

◆ Eleventh Act ◆

With Love on Her Side, Even the Villainess Is the Protagonist

Abruptly, the floor, the walls, everything tilts.

“Whoa, whoa! What the heck?! What’s going on?! I’m slip— Denis, at least stop working, wouldja?!”

“Hold on to something, please. Almond, you and Bel fall back for now!” Elefas shouts.

Jasper hastily grabs Denis, who’s absorbed in dismantling the drive unit, and keeps him from falling. Beelzebuth has been fighting in a narrow corridor, but he dashes back into the furnace room and closes the door.

Almond flies in through the small window Elefas has been using to support Beelzebuth by tossing sacred items and magic items out to him. Elefas slams the window shut, then drops to the floor and takes cover, still holding Almond.

They’ve grown used to hearing explosions and rumbling in the distance, but this movement is something else entirely. The whole palace is rocking as if it’s trying to keep its balance.

Don’t tell me the divine items used to keep it afloat have been damaged! I told them and told them not to fight near those...

The plan is to blow up the drive units and crash the palace into Ashmael, but only after help reaches them. Without magic, that’s the very best Elefas and the others can do. But just as he’s thinking that, a strange sensation—or rather, one that he usually takes for granted—makes his eyes fly open.

His magic has returned. Almond pokes his head out from beneath Elefas and shouts, “Demon King!”

An explosion echoes from an entirely unexpected direction. The soldiers swarming in the corridor are all blown to smithereens, and a great hole yawns in the wall. The individual who produced the opening smiles in through it.

“You’ve done well.”

“Master Claude...”

His red-eyed master is there, black hair streaming in the wind. Beelzebuth kneels, while Almond spreads his wings and flies into his arms.

Relieved, Elefas is on the point of kneeling when a ferocious gust blows in from behind Claude. When he sees the pale silver scales of the flapping colossus outside, he freezes.

Jasper hangs on to his beret, shouting against the fierce wind, “Wh-what is that?! A white dragon?! What did you do now, Demon King?!”

“Why are you getting angry at me? That’s not my fault; it’s my father.”

“You can’t mean— Then Master Luciel took your place?! But then that’s a god!”

“My mage is as clever as always.”

He fights the urge to clutch his head. Just then, drawn-out screams reach them. The tip of the white tail flicks two shapes away, and they crash into the wall of the furnace room. It’s Walt and Kyle.

“No way, we can’t fight that thing! It’s just not happening! It’s huge, and it’s not an opponent we can take. I mean it!”

“D-don’t whine, Kyle, this is work...!”

“We’re gonna be worked to death at this rate!”

Since they’re under Claude’s protection, neither of them is hurt, but Elefas agrees wholeheartedly with Walt’s objection. Their feelings seem to have gotten through to Claude; he’s watching the receding dragon, his eyes narrowed. “Good point. Walt, Kyle, and Elefas, you stay here.”

“Huh? Do you mean it, Master Claude? You’re not going to tell us to die with you?”

“What do you think I am? Bel, you come. You can go all out, can’t you?”

“Of course, sire. I and the other demons will protect both you and your father with all our might. This time, we will not fail,” Beelzebuth responds firmly.

Claude smiles. “Almond, you stay here and be their liaison. Can you do that? James is busy with another matter.”

“Yessir!”

“But, Master Claude, even if the demons are with you, going alone isn’t...”

Kyle and Walt have taken a step forward, their faces grave. Elefas also rises to his feet. Precisely because this is work, they have the pride to steel themselves for death.

“It’s just a division of labor. Right now, I need to stop that idiot father of mine.”

“C-come to think of it, where is Master Luciel headed?”

“For Ellmeyer, obviously. Specifically Alucato, the imperial capital.”

The blood drains from Jasper’s face. He has a crowd of friends and acquaintances there. “Can you stop him?!”

“I will. First we’ll drop that thing in Ashmael, where you meant to crash the palace. That way we’ll rope the holy king into this, too.”

“Yeah, but how?! Just getting something that huge to change direction is gonna be a job and a half!”

“It’s doooooone!!”

At Denis’s sudden scream, everyone falls silent. He turns to them, eyes shining. “This is really incredible! I don’t understand magic or sacred power, the energy side of things, but this steering mechanism! The technology is amazing. You have to use sacred power to work it, though, and that’s way too inefficient, so I overhauled it so it could be steered by hand!”

“Y-you overhauled it to... You actually did that?”

“Huh? Well, I mean, it’s more convenient if anyone can do it, right?” Denis simply wears a blank look on his face, and everyone shuts up.

After thinking a moment, Claude asks, “You can steer it, then? What about weapons?”

“It looks like they’ve got cannons and things! Except those run entirely on

magic, so I can't really..."

"In other words, Elefas could work them."

"...Pardon? How could I...?" He has a bad feeling about this, and Denis promptly confirms it.

"Oh, we could just use Elefas to power them! I see!"

"No, don't act like that makes sense— Power them?! Doesn't that mean they'll suck my magic dry?!"

"You'll be fine. Are you able to contact Isaac?"

"Y-yes! It should be just a little longer...!" Rising to her feet, Rachel takes out the sacred stone.

Claude nods. "In that case, have him tell you where to steer the palace."

"M-Master Claude. That's asking too much. He can't even see where we are."

"Almond can see how things look outside, and you've got humans who can relay that information. We're still over the ocean, but since you work as a journalist, I'd imagine you're well versed in geography." Claude's eyes turn to Jasper, who points to himself, blinking in confusion. "You're Aileen's brilliant subordinates. I'm sure you can do it."

"Th-that's easy to say, but... Young Master Isaac's impressive, and even he's not—"

"Though I had been taken over and lost my mind, he still trapped me quite handily. I won't let anyone tell me he can't do this."

The corners of Claude's lips rise. No one—at least, no one present—is brave enough to argue.

"Answer me. What have you done to Master Luciel? Why has he become a dragon?"

Amelia sounds thoroughly mystified. Her hair is a soft light brown, and her voice is gentle. She's the kind, earnest-looking heroine of Game 4. She also bears a faint resemblance to Lilia.

Aileen clenches her fists. Planting her feet firmly, she shouts up at her, "I

could ask you that very same question! What have you done to Lady Lilia?!”

“Oh, this? The woman is dangerous, so I’ve sealed her soul into her sacred sword. I’ll draw it out of her corpse, to ensure she won’t be miraculously reborn or something like that.”

“Her...corpse...”

“I did the same thing to my sister, Grace. It’s possible because the sacred sword is the soul of the maiden herself. Besides, this way, I can use the sealed soul’s power until it’s completely destroyed. Oh, and don’t bother hoping she might still be alive. Everything I’ve done happens after death.”

Amelia has descended to the ground. With the merest hint of a smile, she lowers Lilia’s floating body, then grabs her head, holding it up to display it. She might as well be showing off a strangled chicken.

Lilia’s broken neck is slack. The pupils of her violet eyes are dilated. Thick blood drips from a hole in the left side of her chest. Her limbs hang limp and still.

“I’ll use this body as my new vessel, since Grace’s body was destroyed.”

Biting back a cry that’s neither a scream nor rage, Aileen grinds her teeth and growls. “How...dare you...!”

“Why, I thought you’d be grateful to me.”

“Of course I’m not!! That woman is—”

They weren’t friends. They weren’t companions. Rivals? The thought disgusts her.

However, there was definitely something there. It was the one thing showing her that, even if her ridiculous memories said she was reborn into the world of an *otome* game, this is reality, and she should live her life accordingly.

“I needed to be the one to defeat her!! And yet—!”

Not love, not hate, not friendship. Aileen doesn’t know what to call their relationship. It doesn’t need a name.

She does know one thing, though.

“You lose.”

She forces a smile, trying to change her sob into a sneer. The attempt to fight the emotion that’s filling her warps that expression, but even so, she keeps it in place.

Just as the other girl must have done, at the end.

“You’re trying to achieve the Queen ending. To do that, you need Lilia Reinoise. She didn’t care if you killed her. To think you’d pick a fight with her when you didn’t even know that!”

“...Both you and this woman say such incomprehensible things.”

“You don’t have to comprehend them. They’re just secrets reincarnated lunatics share with each other.”

Only she and the other girl understood them.

“What I mean is that Lady Lilia hasn’t lost to you. She’s won.”

Now she’s the only one who does.

“In addition, that Master Luciel is the one from whom you stole Lady Grace. He isn’t subject to the oath any longer. That wish of yours will never come true now!”

Amelia blinks her violet eyes. Then she lowers them—and gives a slow smile. “Then I’ll simply have to put him under the same oath again.”

“As if I’d let you!”

Shifting the holy sword to her right hand, she channels magic into it from the shadow beneath her feet, and as the woman turns to go, she slashes at her back. Without even raising an eyebrow, Amelia manifests her sacred sword, instantly smashing both the holy sword and its magic. “Did you imagine you could win against a real sacred sword?”

However, Aileen’s true aim lies elsewhere. Biting her lip, she opens her eyes wide, determined not to look away. She sets her hand on the hilt.

Don’t hesitate, she tells herself. This is for the best. Don’t doubt. Gritting her teeth, she pulls it out.

She pulls Lilia's sacred sword—Lilia's soul—from the girl's corpse.

Then she slashes at Amelia. Amelia's blade parries, and a blast ensues.

"If you break that sacred sword, her soul will be destroyed."

"She'd laugh and say that's better than letting you corrupt it. That's the sort of woman she is! She'd tell me to use it to defeat you!"

"That's only a shell, though. A sacred sword with no substance..."

Amelia takes a single step forward. Immediately, the shock wave from her sacred sword sends Aileen flying. She reflexively tries to use Claude's magic, but she's up against the sacred sword. Fine tears open in her skirt, her shoulder, her arm; crimson races across her cheek, and she's unable to prevent it.

"...could never be a match for the real thing."

She's just managed to regain her footing when a shadow falls over her. She rolls to the side, evading.

"Stop scampering around, you crafty little thing. Just give up."

"As if I could!"

"Then what do you think you can do with that empty sacred sword?"

An attack bears down on her from above, and she slashes it away. The resulting shrill clang is oddly light; it's all she can do to block Amelia's heavy attack.

"What do you claim that shell of a sword is capable of?!"

".....!"

"Well, no matter. It will use up a bit of power, but I simply have to erase it. If the soul of the Maid of the Sacred Sword vanishes, then her sword vanishes as well! You're only the Maid of the Cursed Sword. You could never manifest a sacred sword!"

Amelia slashes upward. The impact jolts both of Aileen's arms up, leaving her stomach unguarded, and the woman kicks it. Aileen flies back, crashing into the palace wall. In the next moment, Amelia is right in front of her, one hand gripping her neck.

“Now I really will be the only Maid of the Sacred Sword!”

“...Y-you’re...!”

“Aileen!!”

James and Auguste charge in from the side. Amelia twists away, evading their holy swords, then takes to the air.

Serena supports Aileen as she coughs.

“You’re...all...safe—”

“Hey, make it fast! Auguste is wounded so he won’t last long!”

“I know!”

“Wait—”

Without hesitating, James and Auguste charge at Amelia. Aileen tries to stop them, but someone grips her hand. It’s Serena.

The warmth in it makes Aileen’s eyes widen.

“Serena, you... That’s...”

“She said to give it to you. This is the real thing apparently.”

When she looks Serena in the eye, the girl goes on in a trembling voice, “She said something about love. That you should make it stronger... Steal it back. It made no sense. She told me it was proof of the Maid of the Sacred Sword’s love.”

“Proof of love...steal it...back...”

“She...protected me... Told me to r-run... What does that even mean? She’s not supposed to be some dashing hero...!”

Serena’s looking down. Aileen hugs her head to her, pulling her close so that she won’t see what’s spilling from her eyes. The girl buries her face in Aileen’s shoulder, but she still doesn’t let go of her left hand.

She’s magnifying what the Maid of the Sacred Sword gave her, making it many times greater, and giving it to Aileen.

A real love, to fill the empty sacred sword.

It's just like that development in Game 2.

What a typical thing for her to think of.

"Do... Do you know...what you need to do?"

"I do."

Steal it back, one more time.

It will be the real sacred sword this time. A sacred sword that woman has made real.

"Serena. Can I ask you to take care of Lady Lilia's body?"

Serena nods. Once she's seen that, Aileen shifts her grip on the empty sacred sword so that the blade is pointing down. Serena releases her left hand.

Unlike the one in the game scenario or the legends, the real sacred sword can wound humans as well. She doesn't hesitate, though.

This is the path the player has created to help the protagonist win. There's no point in not trusting her.

"Wait! What are you—?!"

In order to steal the genuine sacred sword one more time, Aileen plunges it into her stomach.

The soul of the Maid of the Sacred Sword, and her love. Inside her body, she'll make them whole again.

Aileen bends double, and light explodes from within her.

No matter how carefully Lester prepares, things never go according to plan. Actually, he doesn't think any strategy counts as a plan unless he's factored in irregularities.

"It doesn't get more brute force than this. What a dim-witted strategy— It may not even *be* a strategy."

"Hey, I'm right there with you! And listen, you'd better get this through your head: When the demon king's involved, no strategy has *ever* gone according to plan! That's one hundred percent not my fault, all right?!"

“It’s time. Give your orders.”

Lester tosses Isaac the sacred stone they’re using as a communicator, as if none of this were his problem.

At his wit’s end, Isaac looks down at the map that’s spread across the table and starts talking. “Hey, can you hear me? You’re in position, right?”

“We sure are, Young Master Isaac. Sorry I’m not Rachel. Ah-ha-ha, there’s a gigantamongous dragon headed straight for us, ah-ha-ha-ha-ha. I really don’t think we should be camped right in front of that thing!”

“You can’t maneuver real well, right? In that case, you’re in the best spot. Denis!”

“Here! Okay, let’s go. Ignition!”

“Get me outta here; your uncle Jasper doesn’t wanna diiiiie!”

As Isaac sighs over the difference between Denis’s enthusiastic voice and Jasper’s, he hears a whole lot of noise from the other end of the sacred stone. It’s wind.

“Whoa, hey, fast, isn’t this too fast?!”

“Oh, of course; there’s only half of it now, so the calculations are off! Still, more momentum is better, right?!”

“Hang on a minute, Demon King Senior’s mouth is wiiiiiiide open!”

“It’s fine, the demon king will probably block it!”

“Probably?!”

Jasper’s voice is drowned out by a loud crash. Ducking on reflex, Isaac immediately hails them. “Are you alive?!”

“S-somehow. Ten seconds to impa—I mean seven, six— I wanted to get married!”

“Elefas, don’t you dare miss!”

“I know... I knew I’d be handed this role... I would have liked to get married, too...”

“Three, two...”

“Gooooo, Floating Demon Palace One-Half!”

“What’s up with that name?”

Reflexively, Isaac heckles Denis. A moment later, the biggest, loudest explosion yet echoes from the sacred stone. He gazes at it warily, wondering if the stone itself might blow up.

Lester, who’s been listening to all of this in the conference room with him, murmurs as if he really means it, “As I said, you really can’t call a suicide attack a ‘strategy.’”

The suicidal charge, a combination of speed and direction, packs quite a punch.

Humans are amazing, Claude thinks, looking down at the sight.

“It is always humans who defy the gods, isn’t it?”

Even as the divine dragon’s howl blows part of it away, the floating palace Denis has hijacked charges straight at him. Although he’s called it a “palace,” the whole island is floating. It’s bigger than Luciel, and just as he turns to run for it, they blast him with cannons.

With his escape cut off, Luciel screams, thrown off-balance. What will happen if the palace rams into him now, at full speed?

“Gooooo, Floating Demon Palace One-Half!”

“What’s up with that name?”

The palace rams into Luciel’s side and begins to fall, taking the dragon with it. In the ground beneath the building, the drive furnace blazes up with a roar, accelerating. He and Beelzebuth fly after it. It’s Claude’s duty to distract the struggling Luciel on the way down.

I’m not all that good at defending...

However, it’s only until they reach the holy king, who’s standing tall right in the middle of the desert.

Hoping to get this tiresome chore over with faster, Claude creates an

enormous sphere of magic in midair.

“Elefas, Walt, and Kyle. Make sure everyone gets out safely.”

“Huuuuuuuh?! What are you saying, Master Claude? You can’t mean—”

“My mage is quite clever.”

Claude feels as if he’s heard, “Don’t do it!” or something of the sort through the magic, but he ignores it, circles around behind the palace, and hits it with the sphere. Dragon and palace slide over the ocean together, kicking up white waves, and crash into the holy king’s barrier as they reach the shore.

“There we go.”

“Don’t give us that, you idiot demon kiiiiing!” Baal roars from the middle of the desert. He’s thrust both arms out to support the barrier, trying to shut out the explosions and vibrations that are breaking through here and there. “You actually dropped that thing!! Didn’t you think it might be better to avoid causing trouble for us?!”

“I thought, ‘I’ve got an excellent friend.’”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve, that’s what you’ve got! Blowing yourself up, then coming back like nothing happened. Give us an apology, at least!”

“Sire, here he comes!” Beelzebuth warns him.

In the midst of the smoke from the collision, the divine dragon roars, and a blast of magic streaks straight toward them. The attack vaporizes the hot sand; Baal *tsks* and casts a new barrier.

The magic collides head-on with the barrier and rebounds, and the resulting explosion drags in both Luciel and the palace.

“You’re the holy king, all right. Who would’ve thought you could block that?”

“Do you think we’ll forgive you if you compliment us, fool of a demon king?!”

“Master Baal, it’s getting back up!”

Just as Ares has warned, eyes glow beneath the crumbling palace. One is red, the other violet. Then, attempting to shake off the building that’s crushing him, the dragon’s whole body radiates rays of magic.

Flying higher to evade them, Claude uses magic to scoop out the desert under Luciel. Then Baal casts a net of sacred power to hold him down, this time from the sky.

“Hey, you said this was ‘the divine dragon,’ right? What sort of opponent is it? Fill us in.”

“He’s stronger than the fiend dragon.”

“Oh, is he! That’s helpful! In other words, since we have neither holy sword nor sacred sword at the moment, our prospects couldn’t be grimmer!”

“There’s a holy demon sword. Denis made it!” Beelzebuth, who’s dragged Ares into the air by the scruff of his neck, proudly raises his sword.

Baal is watching them silently. His gaze hurts. Ares asks a very serious question. “Isn’t that a remodeled holy sword?”

“He said he demonified it! That’s what makes it a holy demon sword! It gives off flames, and ice, and lightning! You can change it using this stone that slots in. Cool, isn’t it?! You should get one.”

“That’s...easy to say, but...”

“Here you go.”

Elefas has abruptly appeared in midair, and Ares does a shocked double take. Elefas closes the other man’s hands around the sword he’s brought, unprompted. “Denis says, ‘He’s a general, right? The holy king’s general. He’s probably a really strong, intense guy,’ and so this is ‘the Blade of Obliteration.’”

“The Blade...of Obliteration...”

“He says it will emit rays of sacred power if you scream, ‘Obliterate!’”

Everyone except Beelzebuth wonders why he designed it to do that, but Elefas doesn’t give them time to ask. He turns his head, and his eyes come to rest on Claude. “Master Claude. You downed the palace with us in it.”

“As long as you were there, you could teleport everyone to safety.”

“True. But be aware that both Walt and Kyle silently loaded bullets into the holy demon guns that Denis rebuilt for them.”

“.....”

“As you can imagine, I also came near to bursting a few blood vessels. Do we understand each other?”

Averting his eyes, Claude slinks behind Baal. Disgusted, Baal looks down. Then he notices that his barrier is rapidly being eaten through from the inside.

“And? What’s your plan? We see you’ve made various preparations, but no weapon could inflict a decisive blow on that. We can’t seal a god into the demon realm with sacred power. If we have no way to kill him, we’re in checkmate.”

“There’s no need to kill him. He’s just lost himself due to his wife’s death. We’ll restore his sanity. And my wife is going to bring us the means to do it.”

“Aileen will? Well, it does seem like the sort of thing she’d do, but...” Shrugging, Baal folds his arms.

With an audible snap, one of the strings of the netlike barrier breaks.

“Our job is to hold this thing here, then? Even with the two of us, we’ll only last a few minutes at best.”

“No, I’ll hold him. You help.”

Baal unfolds his arms. His face is stern. As Elefas watches them, his eyes are also grim. However, Claude is undeterred. “He told me to kill him. Being my father’s puppet would irritate me.”

“What is this, a late rebellious phase?”

Well said. Smiling a little, Claude looks down.

There’s a snap, and another of the lines of power binding his father comes loose.

“However, that does mean I have enough power to do that. Now that I think about it, it’s only natural. I am the demon king, and I inherited both his power and the power of the wife he loved.”

“But Master Claude, Master Luciel currently possesses unspeakable strength born of desperation! Viewing the situation optimistically isn’t—”

“I know, Elefas. You and the others are here as well, though. Frankly, I probably won’t be thinking that rationally myself, so it should be a close contest.”

Baal and Elefas must have picked up on what Claude has in mind.

Beelzebuth goes without saying, and—either because he’s determined to simply follow orders or because he’s still bewildered by the Blade of Obliteration—Ares says nothing.

A brief silence falls. Planting his hands on his hips, Baal smiles wryly. “If you go on a rampage, we won’t hesitate to seal you this time. Keep it in mind.”

“...I will talk Walt and Kyle around. I can’t speak for Lady Aileen or Master Keith, so let them shout at you later.”

With a series of sharp snaps, the holy king’s barrier begins to break. As they brace themselves, silver-white light pours down from the sky.

In the towering pillar of light, the dragon unfurls his wings, raising his head. He really does look like a god incarnate.

“Hey, it’s going somewhere again!”

“It’s trying to reach Imperial Ellmeyer! The damage will spread far too much if we let it leave this place. Let’s stop it!”

As everyone starts moving, Claude takes a deep breath.

I am human.

However, I am the demon king.

He’s always said those words to himself with resignation, but now he believes in them from the bottom of his heart.



Win happiness both as a human and as the demon king.

That was his wife's wish for him, and she didn't let go of his hand.

His nails grow long and sharp. Scales break through his skin. Horns grow from his cracked forehead, and his mouth begins to split. It feels as though something grotesque is taking over his body, but it isn't frightening.

Not if he believes this is definitely him.

Devour it.

Evolve, using all of your past as fuel.

Trample the god in front of you— Yes, the one to make your beloved wife cry will always be...

Claude roars, and Luciel, who was on the verge of heading out to sea, turns back slightly.

Eyes of different colors, red and violet. The mark of a god.

So what?

He'll swallow both red and violet and be reborn. That is the hallmark of being human.

The black dragon with deep purple eyes flies straight at his opponent, sinking his fangs into the god's neck, and the god screams.

It happens just after Amelia finishes knocking those two insignificant flies to the ground.

When she turns back, the woman is shining.

Her golden hair streams in the wind, and her sapphire eyes glitter. Amelia gazes at what she holds in her hands as if she can't believe it.

The sacred sword.

This is the dazzling light of the real thing, the genuine article. The same as her own and her sister's.

A woman who is not the Maid of the Sacred Sword is standing there, wielding it.

A shudder runs down her spine. Her trembling lips curve. Her throat quivers as if she's about to burst into tears.

"Give me..."

I see. So she had that.

The power she didn't have enough of, power no amount of training was able to compensate for. Not even after she gained the sacred sword, or learned of her rightful destiny, or carved out her sister's soul and acquired the holy power of two people.

It can't be... You're in love with Lucie— her sister had said, right before she cut her head off.

This is it: the opportunity to rid herself of the sense of defeat that even beheading her sister didn't erase.

"Give me thaaaaaaat!!"

With a scream of delight, Amelia raises the sacred sword over her head with all her might.

Aileen blocks the attack squarely and the lights clash, becoming a violent wind that whips their skirts.

—Heavy! This is burning through my strength at a completely different rate... I won't last long!

Behind the woman, she sees James fly away with Serena and Auguste. She can't risk dragging them into this, so she takes a step forward, and Amelia laughs as if she's terribly amused.

"I have no idea how you did it, but I applaud you for obtaining that. Still, you're only the Maid of the Cursed Sword!"

".....!"

"Did you think you'd be able to win just because our weapons were equal?!"

Spinning lightly, Amelia sweeps her sacred sword to the side. The slash cuts right through the palace and everything else behind her. At the very last moment, Aileen manages to evade.

This is the woman who once defeated Luciel's dragon form.

In other words, she's stronger than Luciel.

"Come on, don't die too easily!"

Violet eyes delirious with joy are coming right at her. Their sacred swords clash at impossible speeds; explosions erupt with every blow, and the slashes she evades gouge the earth and mow down trees.

Even when the heels of her shoes are scraped off and her favorite dress is torn, Aileen can't afford to care.

She thrusts with her sword, and its tip grazes Amelia's cheek. Amelia smirks with that wounded cheek, then turns around and slashes Aileen's left arm. Her sharp, efficient movements look like a polished dance.

Aileen's left hand is dyed with blood, growing weaker. With every clash, little by little, she's being forced back.

She's strong.

Well, of course she is. Out of nowhere, Amelia smiles.

"What's this? Have you lost your mind, Maid of the Cursed Sword?"

"We're both out of our minds. To think I'd get to encounter a heroine who's maxed out her stats!"

Without taking their eyes off one another, they run up a wall of broken rubble. Even then, Amelia is faster, and she promptly claims the higher ground.

"It's an honor. I couldn't ask for a worthier opponent!"

"There's very little sense in that bluff! Not that I hate that sort of thing!"

The woman swings her sword down on her, and she blocks the strike in midair. Before her back slams into the ground, she twists her lower body and launches herself off a half-destroyed roof, shifting the direction in which their blades lock. Amelia's back breaks through the wall of the building behind her. However, her grip on the sacred sword doesn't weaken, and its light doesn't dim.

"You are most certainly the Maid of the Sacred Sword!"

Amelia's eyes widen as if she's caught her by surprise.

"You wanted Master Luciel, didn't you?! You wanted to have him no matter what it took, even if others vilified you and no one understood! In that case, be proud of yourself for having come so far!"

"What...are you...?"

"You defeated Lady Grace!"

Grace was killed, and Amelia survived. That is the reality.

"That means your sacred sword is the real thing. It's strong!"

"Th-that's right, of course it is! I am the real Maid of the Sacred Sword, and this is my sword, and yet..."

"And yet why didn't you use this power for your own sake?! That's what the sacred sword is for, isn't it?! It's there to help the Maid find happiness!"

And this sword, the one Aileen has...

Gripping it with both hands, she brings it down. Amelia falls backward into the blasted, ruined courtyard, and Aileen immediately pursues her.

Love is what determines whether the sacred sword is real or not.

In an *otome* game, that's only natural, but it's important. It's also very sad.

Lady Lilia. You really did love Master Cedric...

But as one who called herself the player, no doubt she'd just laugh that off as a condition for clearing the game.

Even now, see? The sacred sword is dripping sparks of light.

"And that is why I'll win."

Win, my protagonist.

Skirt flaring, the Maid of the Sacred Sword smiles.

"After all, I am the protagonist!!"

Gritting her teeth, forcing her tears to evaporate, she raises her sword against her opponent.

For some reason, Amelia simply watches her in a daze— And even in the moment when the real sacred sword slices into her neck, she's smiling happily.

Their surroundings flash pale silver, as if the sword's gleam has banished both dark and light. The Maid of the Sacred Sword and everything else dissolve into particles of light and vanish.

Once she's brought her sword down, Aileen falls to her knees, then crumples to the ground.

Aileen generally wakes up without trouble. Unless she's sick in bed, she never gives her lady-in-waiting any difficulty on that account. Since her marriage, because her husband isn't good with mornings, she's actually been the one waking him up.

As a result, being shaken and told to wake up doesn't seem real to her.

It's like when I was small. Father and my brothers never came to wake me. Even though I was a child, it would have meant entering a lady's room...so this sort of thing only ever happened...

When I'd lost consciousness after Mother flattened me during a practice skirmish.

"Yes, Mother, it's all right. I'm not finished yet!"

"Hey, that's good to hear. You're plenty energetic."

When Aileen springs awake like a trained soldier, she sees Grace.

Perhaps she's made of light: The woman seems rather hazy.

"...Lady Grace? Is this a dream?"

"I wish you'd call me Mother. Even if I'm only a soul now."

"A soul... Where's Lady Amelia?!"

"Right," Grace says, rising from her crouch. "To her credit, I suppose, my little sister passed away without leaving anything behind. Not even her soul; she used up every last bit and destroyed it. She didn't give Luciel and me any time to get mad or even apologize. She won without giving us a chance to get back."

"I...see..."

“My sister was incredible, wasn’t she?”

Grace peers up at the sky. Her face is filled with the sorrow of an older sister who’s lost both the chance for mutual understanding and any reason for it.

With her hands still braced on the ground, Aileen watches her steadily. Then she heaves a big, intentional sigh. “Excessively incredible, really. I never want to see her again.”

“Ha-ha. Listen to you.”

“And? What sort of situation is— Ow!”

As Aileen tries to get to her feet, she realizes that her right foot is twisted in a rather peculiar way.

Looking down, Grace notices it, too.

“...Could it be broken?”

“Oh yes, that’s a break, all right.”

Now that she’s aware of it, it really, really hurts.

Actually, it seems as if I should have noticed sooner, but I ache all over, and I’m so tired...!

Aileen’s face has gone gray.

Grace looks puzzled. “Are you all right? If you use your sacred power to go ‘foom’ and then ‘hup,’ you’ll be able to stand.”

“That’s hardly an explanation! Besides, I think believing anyone is capable of anything if they try is a bad habit of yours, Lady Grace!”

“I can’t argue with that. We do need to get you on your feet, though. This place is liable to come down any minute.”

“What?” Aileen feels the blood drain from her face. Then she pulls herself together. “O-of course, the demons! I’ll summon a demon from my shadow—”

Hastily talking herself through it, she looks down at her shadow, only to see it eclipsed by a much larger one. An earth-shaking roar echoes. Aileen looks up, and the sight of what’s casting that shadow leaves her speechless.

It's a pale silver dragon, and in hot pursuit—a second dragon, this one jet-black.

“M-Master Luciel and...it can't be...Master Claude?!”

Claude spits a ray of magic, and Luciel opens his mouth to respond in kind.

Black and white magic clash in the sky. Aileen ducks and covers, and the rays stream by overhead, shearing through the ruined palace on a diagonal. The severed corner of the island plunges into the ocean.

“Wha...wha-wha-wha? A monster battle?! Why...?”

Aileen looks up, and her eyes widen in shock. Although it's still in the distance, she can see land. It isn't the spot in Ashmael where they chose to drop the palace, to keep the damage to a minimum.

The coast of Ellmeyer?! If those two keep going at that speed...!

They'll reach the imperial capital in less than ten minutes.

Even before that point, there's no telling how much collateral damage Luciel and Claude's fight may cause.

“I swear. What does that idiot think he's doing? —I suppose that's my cue.” Grace looks down, and their eyes meet. “I'm sorry, but I'm borrowing your body.”

“Huh?”

Aileen rises lightly into the air. For some reason, both the pain and the fatigue recede. Or rather, she can't feel them anymore.

What? What??

She can't move her fingers. However, those fingers get a firmer grip on her sacred sword. Grace is blowing away like so much sand, dissolving into particles of light that flow into her.

With a jolt, her body rights itself, but not because she's told it to. Grace is making it happen.

Slipping through the rays that pour down around her, Aileen's body races up into the sky.

“I really must take responsibility for that, at least.”

“H-how?!”

“I’m going to hit him, obviously.”

I knew it, Aileen thinks, but she can’t get the words out.

It’s like a shooting star racing through the midday sky.

Baal is the first one to notice it coming up behind them, and he turns. Then he stares. “Aileen?!”

“Master Baal, fall back! Obliterate!!”

“The holy king, hmm? I do hope you’ll stay friends with my son.”

With a shout he doesn’t understand, she races between the two of them before the attack can reach her.

“Straight ahead, incoming! I’ll block it, so the rest of you—”

“Don’t you work too hard, either.”

Overtaking Elefas, who’s a short distance ahead of the others, she strikes the divine dragon’s ray in two with the sacred sword and speeds up.

“Ailey?!”

“I’m sorry my son and husband are being such a nuisance.”

“Huh?! Who’re you?!”

She passes Walt and Kyle, as well as James and Auguste, who’ve joined them as reinforcements. Slapping down all the attacks from the fighting dragons as she goes, she reaches the demon who’s in the most dangerous spot, closest to Claude.

“Well done, Beelzebuth.”

“You— Uh, I mean, my lady, you’re—”

“You too, Claude.” Gently patting the bloodied black scales, she smiles into his deep purple eyes. “You’ve been working so hard. You’re my son, all right.”

Beyond him, the pale silver dragon with red and violet eyes howls. An attack like a scream streaks straight toward her. It’s pure white, possessing the power

to return everything back to infinite nothingness.

Slashing upward with the sacred sword, she completely neutralizes that attack. Grace is glad she got the opportunity to protect her son.

And so she'll forgive him. This pitiful god she'd reluctantly left behind.

All she can see in those eyes is rage and sorrow. Stubbornly, he opens his mouth again.

"L-Lady Grace. Wait—"

Beelzebuth looks frightened, but she ignores him and heads straight for the dragon.

Another attack comes at her. She slashes right through the light that's threatening to engulf everything, cuts apart the ocean, the sky, and surges forward.

He probably doesn't recognize her. The body does belong to her daughter-in-law, after all. However.

"There's no way I'll forgive you for not recognizing your own wife, you idiot!!"

Putting all her strength behind it, she smashes her fist into his jaw.

Her husband is the only one who could take a blow like that and survive.

The voices and shapes of the couple at the waterline are locked in the ugliest of fights, one fit to dye the peaceful sea with blood.

Perhaps "fight" isn't the word. This is very one-sided.

Still stuck in a body that won't obey her, Aileen decides to consider it a tragedy. Her own body is playing a major role in that scene, but she'd really like to consider it someone else's affair.

"Just look at all the trouble you've caused! I knew you were a good-for-nothing god, and you still have the nerve to call yourself my husband?!"

"I-I'm sorry, Grace, don't hit—"

"L-Lady Grace! Please, no more..."

"Lady Grace, Lady Grace, we're sorry!"

Luciel is back in his human form, and Grace kicks him like a ball. He rolls over the sand, then curls up, hugging his head. Looking very pale, Beelzebuth and Almond get between them.

Cracking her fists audibly, Grace gives them a warning. "Stay out of it. This is a problem between a wife and her husband."

"Th-that may be, but—! Erm, I mean, it was you who left the king all alone!"

Beelzebuth's words stop Grace in her tracks.

"Master cried lots and lots! Don't bully him!" Almond's eyes are filled with tears.

Gently, Aileen backs them up. *You do bear some of the responsibility for making Father sad, Mother.*

Even if she can't speak aloud, Grace will probably hear her.

"...True. I did say I'd come back, and then I didn't."

Aileen abruptly starts seeing double, then her vision ripples. She blinks, feeling herself topple over backward. Before she hits the ground, though, something catches her by the back of her collar and lifts her. She looks up to see a jet-black dragon with gentle eyes, lying half in the water.

"Master Claude."

He knows her. He settles her on his big shoulder, and she softly nestles her cheek against the side of his face.

"I'm sorry, too."

"G-Grace..."

Grace has left Aileen's body. Now just a soul again, she strides over to her husband. Luciel raises his head.

"But listen, it wasn't easy on me, either, all right? You were crying so much, and I couldn't do a thing."

Luciel's tear-filled eyes widen. Grace gives him a wry smile.

"I was watching you the whole time, from inside the sacred sword— From Amelia. I saw you turn into a monster, and I saw Amelia seal you. I saw the

demons hunted and the country we'd tried to build write us both out of its history. I watched as our children forgot me... My sister got stranger and stranger, and I couldn't stop any of it."

"....."

"But listen, I had faith. I knew another woman who'd call herself the demon king's wife would appear, you see."

Aileen blinks, gazing at Grace's profile.

However, Grace's eyes are fixed on Luciel.

"So look, don't cry. It all worked out, didn't it? I've come home."

Grace's figure shimmers like a mirage. Timidly, Luciel reaches out to her. He isn't able to touch her.

Even so.

"...I...missed you so."

"Mm-hmm. So did I."

"I just, I wanted you, to be with me, always. As a soul, as anything at all. That's all I wanted."

"I know."

There's no sensation, no body heat, and yet Grace kneels in the sand and puts her arms around Luciel. Luciel's face crumples like a child's, and he begins to cry. "Such a fool," Grace murmurs, smiling. Tears gleam in her eyes as well.

"...I'm so glad."

Not that we haven't lost anything... Her eyes go to the sacred sword she's still holding.

There's no response. Perhaps all of its power has been used up. It's truly empty. She may have stolen it back, but now that Lilia is gone, her sacred sword will disappear before long.

But wasn't she playing so that she could see an ending like this one?

Or had she been afraid to stop being the player?

Claude rumbles deep in his throat. His eyes seem to be asking her what's wrong, so Aileen tells him. "...I was just thinking that I may actually have lost to Lady Lilia for the first time."

"Grogh."

"I don't understand what you're saying, but perhaps I'm a little frustrated."

A big shadow races across the ocean. A dragon. From its color, it's probably a fire drake. *Why...?* Aileen looks up, and at the sight of the dragon's riders, her eyes widen.

"Milord! Is that you, milord?! Are you sane?!"

"Sir Keith! And— Lady Sahra and Prince Cedric?! What sort of combination is that?!"

Baal, who's standing on the beach, and Ares, who's beside him. Auguste and the other student council members, who are huddled in a group, and Serena— Everyone's attention is diverted from Grace and Luciel at once.

The fire drake lands quietly on the ocean, and Keith leaps down from its back. He splashes through the water, striding up to Claude.

"You're behaving yourself, so I assume you're rational. Do you recognize me?"

"...Gwough..."

"What is that attitude about? You've done something, haven't you. You turned into a demon, you blew yourself up— I've heard the gist of it, but explain that form of yours."



“Grogh gwou...”

“Don’t make excuses!”

“How are you able to converse with him, Sir Keith?”

While Keith is berating Claude, Aileen slowly climbs down from her perch. Perhaps Grace has done her “foom and hup” business because Aileen’s able to move her leg without pain. It does look a little strange, but she pretends she hasn’t noticed. Instead, she makes her way toward the semicircle of onlookers.

All the combatants are gathered here, on the coast that forms Ellmeyer’s national border. Rachel and the others escaped from the floating palace, and although they’re smudged and dirty in places, they seem more or less unharmed.

Lilia’s corpse, which Serena protected through the whole affair, is here as well.

“Serena, your hand.”

“I know. Give it all you’ve got, Sahra! Rachel, set all the sacred stones you took from Hausel here!”

“A-all right...!”

Rachel lines up sacred stones on the sand around Lilia’s corpse, and Serena and Sahra join hands. A ring of light appears, encircling the three heroines.

One by one, the sacred stones shatter, and the gashes in Lilia’s torn body and the hole in her chest gradually close. Aileen watches, hanging back slightly.

There are endings in which Lilia dies. However, there is no point in the game at which she comes back to life. It’s just the same with Amelia.

There’s no suggestion of how it could be done. There isn’t even a flag for it.

If it happens, it will be a genuine miracle.

The final sacred stone breaks, and the light goes out. Lilia’s corpse is whole. It doesn’t have a single visible wound. The Daughter of God has used her power, borrowing the strength of the Saint of Salvation to do it: No doubt everything has been mended perfectly.

However, no matter how they watch, holding their breath, her chest doesn't rise and fall.

The dead don't return to life.

"No... But..."

Sahra bursts into tears, and Serena slams a fist into the sand.

"Luciel. Can't you help them?"

"No. If I could have brought you back to life, I would have done it. Miracles don't happen. That's what makes them miracles."

As they watch from a distance behind her, Grace and Luciel reach that conclusion.

Reality and the scenario. Both are always cruel.

"Li...lia...?"

Cedric walks past her in a daze. His eyes are wide and stunned, a strange mismatch with the smile he's trying to force.

"This...can't be." Unsteadily, stumbling in the sand from time to time, he approaches Lilia. "It can't be... Why? Why did you leave that letter, then?"

As Aileen looks away, hanging her head, the sacred sword catches her eye.

She feels as if it's laughing at her.

"You were lying when you said you loved me. That means your death must be a lie as well, right, Lilia?!"

Imagine genuinely grieving the death of a character!

Lady Aileen, are you the type who can't tell games from reality?

The one who sets the game's events in motion is always the player. Without a player, the characters have no choice but to give up and accept reality.

She feels as if someone has told her so, mocking her.

Until the very end— That woman!

Getting a better grip on the sacred sword, Aileen lifts her head. She starts forward, walking with determination; startled, everyone gets out of her way.

Ares has an arm around Sahra's shoulder, and as the girl looks up, her eyes are filled with tears.

"Stop crying!"

"A-all right!"

"...Is there anything else we can do?" Serena asks weakly. She's resting limply against Auguste's chest.

Aileen doesn't answer. Reaching Cedric, who's slumped to the ground beside Lilia's corpse, she closes his fingers around the hilt of the sacred sword.

"What...Aileen?"

"Serena, Lady Sahra, come help. One more time."

"But there's nothing left to heal..."

"The sacred sword?"

Serena seems to have realized something. Startled, Sahra looks up.

Aileen nods. "It's her soul. You can heal it, can't you, Daughter of God?"

"W-wait. Are you telling Sahra to use her life, the way the holy sword would have required?! That isn't—"

"Be quiet, Ares!" Sahra snaps. Startled, Ares shuts up. "I'll do it. I can."

The Daughter of God is capable of making her own choices now.

"...Serena. Will you be all right?"

"I'm fine. I'm doing it. You stay there and watch."

The Saint of Salvation has found a man she can really believe in.

"Listen to me, Master Cedric. You are the only one who can save Lady Lilia."

And the Maid of the Sacred Sword...

"Run this sword into her. You must return her soul to her body."

"You want me to do a—a thing like that?"

"Yes! You, whom she chose, are the only one who can!"

Cedric's eyes widen. Aileen meets them squarely. "It will be fine. You can do

it.”

These are the words she never managed to tell him. An atonement for the past.

Cedric’s hand grips the sword, and she enfolds it with her own hands. He squeezes her hands in return, then nods firmly. “Thank you, Aileen.”

Aileen isn’t about to forgive this man. A part of her will probably always loathe him.

Still, as he presses his lips together and holds the sacred sword, she admits he’s become a hero.

For that reason, she smiles at Lilia’s still form. “Would you look at that, Lady Lilia? Neither you nor I can do this. Everyone else is going to save you.”

Cedric tucks his chin, gripping the sword with both hands.

It’s simply a matter of repairing her soul while reaffixing it to her body. Nothing more.

What they’re doing is no miracle.

Aileen straightens up. Then she turns on her heel. Behind her, a soft light that stings her eyes illuminates the sea and the sky beyond it.

Claude has craned his long neck toward Aileen in a worried way. He licks her cheek, and for the first time, she realizes she’s crying. She laughs. “I’m all right. I’m just rather overwhelmed.”

The Maid of the Sacred Sword is awakened by love.

It’s an *otome* game cliché, nothing more.

“Grough.”

“As I said, I have no idea what you’re saying. If you’re concerned, transform quickly and hold me close, please. My leg is probably broken.”

“Gwoff?!”

Claude’s startled yelp is quite hysterical, and Aileen giggles. As she leans against him, his black scales begin to gleam. She doesn’t even have to look to know he’s reverting to his human form, and she closes her eyes. *Is this my*

cliché, then?

A final boss who's loved will always be saved. Even if the one who loves him is the villainess.

As hard scales change into soft skin, gentle light pours down over the ocean. The light from the beach mingles with it, and their surroundings glitter like a rainbow.

How lovely, Aileen thinks. Entranced, she presses her cheek to his chest. Then realization sinks in.

"Aileen."

Her husband's red eyes peek down at her, silky black hair spilling over his shoulders. As his lips draw closer, his face is as devastatingly handsome as always.

But below it.

He's completely naked!

The cheers that rise behind them and Aileen's red-faced shriek echo in the rainbow-colored sky.

◆ Final Act ◆

The Dreamt-of Happy Ending Flag

“Are you an idiot, Lady Aileen?”

The spite directed at her from beneath the white veil makes a vein start to throb on her temple.

“You rescued me, then? On top of that, you lost the sacred sword to do it? After I’d raised you to be the strongest Maid of the Sacred Sword in the history of the game!!”

“Would you *please* refrain from saying such things!”

“It’s fine. Rachel and Serena are both here, but nobody’s commenting on it.”

“As I have told you time and time again, that is your fault!”

As Aileen shouts at her, Lilia heaves a pointed sigh. She’s wearing a bridal gown. “Certainly, ‘They all survived and lived happily ever after’ may be the classic approach, but it’s boring, boring, boring! Getting married now is *dull*! I don’t want to consign my social life to the dust like this!!”

“It’s social death you chose, remember? Give up already.” Serena is helping the wailing Lilia get dressed.

Lilia pouts. “Would it kill you to agree with me, Serena? You aren’t engaged to Auguste yet. Isn’t that why?”

“Don’t lump us together. The Gilbert family title was restored just last month. If I suddenly get engaged, too, people will get suspicious. No engagements for me for a year! Besides, I have to study for the female bureaucrat appointment exam they’re holding for the first time next year. And besides, he’s still on the bottom rung.”

“I’m told they’ve decided to promote Auguste, though.”

“He is the face of the Holy Knights, and Master Claude values him highly. I hear he’s received more offers of matches with eligible young ladies than can

be counted on two hands.”

When Aileen murmurs highly classified information, Rachel puts in a supporting argument.

Serena’s eyebrows twitch, and she looks down at Rachel. “So you’re patronizing me now, just because you’re engaged?”

“Oh, not at all. It’s just that your follow-through is always weak, Lady Serena. I’m worried about you.”

“Oh? You think you’ll be all right, then? That man hasn’t given you anything resembling a spoken proposal; he just signed a contract. Complete loser. Not only that, but your families are likely to fight, aren’t they? I really do think you should drop him.”

“Isaac has already taken steps in his own way. Besides, that’s what marriage is. On that point, Lady Serena, I think you’re amazing. Waiting for Auguste based on nothing more than trust in his feelings...”

“And you’re putting it like that because...?”

“Getting things in writing is important.”

Rachel and Serena have their foreheads pressed together and sparks are flying.

As Aileen starts feeling tired just watching, Lilia sidles up to her. “Goodness, the heroine and villainess of Game 2 are scaaary, Lady Aileen.”

“Don’t cling to me. Besides, that’s less than persuasive coming from you.”

“Argh. Maybe a kidnapping event will occur during the wedding. Don’t you think something like that could have happened if the game had showed Lilia Reinoise getting married?”

“Don’t try to create something that doesn’t exist. At any rate, you set up that flag yourself: In the letter you left Cedric, you said you’d marry him if you came back alive.”

Since she’d tried to leave that letter for him and die, Cedric had desperately negotiated with the people around him in order to make this wedding happen, while Marcus and Lester and the rest had gotten down on their knees and

begged Claude. The Game 1 characters were all capable individuals who played vital roles at the heart of the empire. When they banded together, of course they were formidable.

Lilia gives an exaggerated sigh. “Yes, that blew up in my face. That really should have been a death or disappearance flag, you know? To think it would turn out like this... Life really is a craptastic game.”

“Life.” Hearing that word from Lilia puts a smile on her lips. “My profound condolences. Master Cedric is possessive. I would resign yourself and retire from being the player.”

“I wonder if they’ve made a Game 5.”

“Stop it. They haven’t. There’s no way they have. Even if they have, if it’s not set in another world, I won’t allow it.”

“But there were fan discs for Games 3 and 4, weren’t there?”

“Quit being stubborn! I am telling you to retire!!”

“Um, um, excuse me!” says a bright voice, and the door of the bride’s dressing room opens. Sahra enters, looking tense. Behind her, Roxane has a hand to her forehead. “Why did you open the door before anyone inside gave permission?!”

“Huh? Oh! Um, I’m so sorry, I’ll go do that over!”

“Never mind that. Lady Roxane, Lady Sahra, do come in.” Taking her to task for her breach of etiquette seems like too much work.

Sahra enters, cringing a bit. However, when she sees Lilia, her eyes light up. “H-how lovely...! So this is what a bride’s dress looks like!”

“Why are you here? Actually, what are you up to now?”

“Um, I came as Miss Roxane’s attendant, and Ares is guarding Master Baal!”

“Huh? Gracious. Ares isn’t dead yet? He’s actually working?”

“H-he’s not dead, and he’s being a proper general! He’s been coming right home after work lately, and sometimes we make dinner together...!”

Lilia and Serena’s candid questions make Sahra tear up. They look like two

bullies and their victim, but apparently the three of them are surprisingly close.

Roxane has entered slowly, a little behind Sahra. Sighing, she bows. “I apologize for my companion, Lady Aileen.”

“Lady Roxane. You’re looking very well... Um, regarding the other day...”

Three months previously, the Queendom of Hausel effectively collapsed. Immediately after Baal’s safe return to the Kingdom of Ashmael, they held secret talks about how to handle the situation. As she remembers them, Aileen’s eyes wander uneasily.

“I see. Then quite by accident, the divine dragon happened to fall on us, in addition to the floating palace. In other words, Imperial Ellmeyer is in no way responsible for the fact that Master Baal, the noblest personage in our land, has collapsed from exhaustion. Very well. Let us hear what you have to say.”

The talks were conducted remotely via screens powered by sacred stones, with James and Lester in charge of Ellmeyer’s end. Cowed by the intimidation aura Roxane had radiated, the two of them promptly caved and apologized. According to what Aileen has heard, Rudolph cackled aloud as he watched this all play out.

“I believe that is how friendships between men usually go. I’ve resigned myself to it.”

“...It’s a great relief to hear you say so.”

“I do hope Master Baal will settle down, but in any case. Speaking of that, Lady Aileen. Regarding the joint edits to the historical texts we intend to make together—”

Roxane methodically begins to discuss the arrangements, and Aileen finds herself hoping very much that they will remain friends. After all, whether their husbands get along well or badly, they do plan the most outrageous things, and fine adjustments like this will continue to be necessary.

“Yes, that would be fine with me. I don’t think Lady Grace would wish for that, either.”

“Very well. Personally, I would prefer to set the record straight...but I do think

there are times when it's best to have it otherwise. The day of the treaty signing really was a disaster."

There's a faraway look in Roxane's eyes. Aileen giggles. "And what about you, Lady Roxane? Are things going well between you and Master Baal?"

The other woman doesn't respond. Aileen stiffens slightly, wondering if she's put her foot in it somehow, but that isn't it.

A faint, sweet flush steals into Roxane's cheeks, and her long eyelashes rise and fall like the wings of a butterfly. "Yes... Master Baal was kind enough to tell me he loves me, and...it, erm, appears to be mutual..."

"I-it's wonderful that you're so close!"

Upon examination, the details of the matter are the saccharine-sweet variety. She speaks loudly, trying to disguise her reaction, and Sahra turns back from her conversation with Lilia and Serena, looking startled. "I'm sorry, Miss Roxane...! Are you feeling ill? Are you all right? Maybe you should sit down."

"I-I'm fine... This isn't our usual palace, you know. Don't immediately make a fuss like that."

"But your face is red. Master Baal made me swear to take the best possible care of you, and Ares turned white as a sheet and said that, if anything happened to you, we really would be executed!"

"Lady Aileen, it's time."

A certain question is on the tip of Aileen's tongue, but before she can ask it, Rachel whispers in her ear. There are things she wants to discuss, but work must take priority. Aileen rises to her feet. "I shall leave first, then."

"Aww! Lady Aileen, you're not going to lead me down the aisle?"

"How many times must I tell you? Your marriage to Prince Cedric is merely a footnote to Master Claude's ceremony! A pardon from the new emperor! Following his coronation ceremony!"

"Boooriiing!" Lilia screams. She, Serena, and Sahra haven't changed a bit. Only Roxane congratulates her properly.

"—May the reign of His Imperial Majesty, Claude Jean Ellmeyer be filled with

blessings.”

Far away, a bell is tolling. Its peals announce the end of one era and the beginning of another.

The pure white dress with its long train has been worn by generations of empresses. It’s said that the wife of the very first emperor of Ellmeyer wore it during the coronation, but both the luster of its fabric and the softness of the fur trim that runs along its collar and cuffs seem brand-new.

“Lady Aileen. Proceed to the balcony, if you would.”

Prompted by Rachel, she steps out into the corridor. Auguste immediately falls in beside her as her guard, and James steps in to guide them. They pass Rudolph, who’s giving her a thumbs-up. Then, turning a corner, they encounter Isaac. Once again, he’s managed to slip in somehow.

Smiling wryly, she raises her right hand, and Isaac raises his left. As she passes him wordlessly, their palms connect with a sharp *smack*.

When she reaches the double doors that lead to the balcony, her maids are waiting for her. They begin performing a final check, determined not to let a single hair be out of place. The mantle they drape over her shoulders as the finishing touch is embroidered with lilies in gold and silver thread.

Rachel ties the mantle’s cord, then bows her head deferentially. “You’re ready, Empress Aileen.”

“It’s a little early to call me that.”

“I wanted to be the first to say it.” Smiling, Rachel steps back and takes the silver tray with the empress’s diadem from the maid who’s carried it in.

“Presenting His Majesty, the Emperor.”

Keith is also using Claude’s title a bit prematurely. Perhaps he feels the same as Rachel. No, considering the length of time he’s served him, his feelings are surely more intense.

Claude approaches from the depths of the opposite corridor, accompanied by Walt and Kyle. As he walks, the maids are taking care of last-minute wardrobe details. That said, his black hair is lustrous even when it hasn’t been combed, his

skin is flawless, and with those red eyes, as ever, he's the most stunning person in the world. His magnificent mantle is embroidered with beautiful gold and silver dragons.

Lilies for the empress, dragons for the emperor. It's said that the former symbolizes the Maid of the Sacred Sword, while the latter shows the emperor's power, but she's sure the real explanation is much more straightforward.

They're the demon realm's most beautiful flower, the one the demon king gave to her, and his other form.

Before she and Claude have time to exchange any words, Walt and Kyle open the doors to the balcony.

The balcony was designed to be visible both from the central square and from the wide avenue that runs from the capital's main gate all the way to the southern edge of the castle. When they step onto it, a wave of cheers go up.

Even so, as Claude and Aileen turn to face each other, silence falls.

Rachel kneels beside Aileen. From the tray she holds, Claude takes the empress's diadem.

Their eyes meet, but neither speaks. Slowly, Aileen bends her head, and Claude gently places the crown on it.

However, since this empire began with the Maid of the Sacred Sword, the ritual doesn't end there.

Rising, Aileen looks at the silver tray in Keith's hands as he kneels beside Claude. On it is the sheathed sacred sword.

It's only a replica, of course. It still counts as a national treasure, though, and the symbol of the empire.

Just as generations of empresses have done before her, she picks up the sword.

The fact that it's heavier than the real one strikes her as a bit funny.

Slowly, Claude kneels. Aileen draws the sacred sword. Its blade gleams in the sunlight.

The Maid of the Sacred Sword gives up her sword and becomes empress. The emperor receives it, protecting the nation and the world in her place.

She's dreamed of this ritual since she was a child.

In this empire, the man the empress loves is crowned emperor. Even if that man happens to be the demon king.

She presses the flat of the blade against Claude's shoulder. In that moment, like a miracle, a stronger gust of wind blows, and cheers erupt. Gunpowder manufactured by Quartz and compounded by Luc fires a salute from the great cannon Denis has made. A flock of crows take flight from the imperial castle, led by Almond and Sugar.

Under a storm of falling petals, Claude rises to his feet, sheathes the sacred sword, and hangs it at his waist. Putting his arm around the waist of the empress who's given him that sword, he looks down at his people from the balcony.

"Love live the emperor!"

"Long live the empress!"

"Glory to Imperial Ellmeyer!"

The cheers ring out again and again, loudly enough to drown out the noise of the camera shutter as Jasper takes photographs right next to them.

The castle bells begin to toll, echoed by bell towers all through the capital. The resonating peals become a rondo that climbs high into the sky, celebrating the birth of the new ruler.

In Year 667 of Imperial Ellmeyer's calendar, Claude Jean Ellmeyer was crowned its seventeenth emperor.

On that day, snow crystals created a rainbow in the clear winter sky, and future generations would say it had been a day when miracle followed miracle.

The coronation ceremony, the wedding of the second prince, and a grand ball hosting guests from around the world. The whole capital is decorated with flowers and lanterns, and no one even thinks of sleep.

The scene is more boisterous than usual, but peaceful.

...If it weren't for Aileen's husband, the brand-new emperor, lying on the bed and sulking.

"The holy king beat me to it."

"Why not simply congratulate him, Master Claude? You aren't being very mature."

"Neither is he. Lovestruck and bragging constantly... How should I know whether it's going to be a boy or a girl? You have no idea how many times I considered literally kicking him out of the empire!"

"Honestly..." Aileen sighs, then glances out the window. She sees a few snowflakes here and there, and for a moment she suspects her husband; however, in this season, it's only to be expected.

"Why? What's wrong with me? It can't be my face, can it? Is it how I behave? No, that's not it. We held the coronation ceremony and Cedric's wedding at the same time, so things have been hectic... There's far too much busywork to begin with, and they sequestered me for three whole days to purify me before the coronation..."

Ignoring her husband as he complains about the preparations for the ceremony, now over and done with, Aileen slips on a dressing gown and opens the balcony door. It isn't as cold as she braced for.

"How lovely..."

The lights of the capital will remain lit all night in celebration of the new emperor, and the drifting snow gleams palely in their glow. It's as if the stars were falling down to earth.

When she looks around, out of the corner of her eye, she sees lightning and flames rising at the old castle. Still, one could technically call that a wondrous sight. She has the feeling that they're rather frenetic, shining brighter and blazing higher than they did for the wedding, but if she lets James handle it, everything will be all right. Or at least, she'd like to believe that it will.

"Leaving me alone? That's pretty mean." Unfurling a shawl, her husband wraps it and his arms around her from behind.

Aileen shrugs. "Mother taught me that a little appropriate neglect is important."

"...Everything that mother of mine taught you is absolutely uncalled for."

"I think I'll pass them down as rules of conduct for the demon king's wife. I wonder if she's well."

She catches herself looking up at the night sky, although apparently the gate to the demon realm is beneath the old castle. She thinks perhaps she should look in that direction instead, but Claude is hugging her tightly, and she can't move.

"She's probably fine. After all, my nuisance of a father is behaving himself in the demon realm."

"That's true. They can be together always there, even if she is just a soul."

"If this fellow seems about to rampage again, I'll destroy him and the whole demon realm properly this time, so you take care of that one."

With that terrifying declaration as her parting remark, Grace vanished with Luciel, a powerful figure to the last. As she dragged him off by the scruff of his neck, he waved and said, "See you later." He can't actually be planning to come visit again, can he?

Whatever else happens, she hopes he won't come seeking refuge after marital spats. Otherwise their world will end up being destroyed along with the demon realm.

"Come to think of it, they're going to put me in the history texts as 'the Maid of the Cursed Sword who vanquished the Maid of the Sacred Sword' and 'the demon king's wife.'"

"Oh, the historical revisions? I hear they've only corrected Grace Dark from 'the demon king's pawn' to 'the demon king's wife,' and that Amelia Dark will keep the name 'Maid of the Sacred Sword' and the title of Ellmeyer's founder."

"Yes. Lady Amelia genuinely was the Maid of the Sacred Sword, and she was also the one who sealed Master Luciel and rebuilt Imperial Ellmeyer... I doubt Lady Grace or Master Luciel will mind."

Roxane was disappointed, but it isn't as if unveiling that history will save anyone.

More than anything, the collapse of the Queendom of Hausel has left the world reeling. They shouldn't cause any more needless confusion. It isn't as if Ellmeyer is hoping to take the Queendom's place.

"I wonder if I'll be able to become as strong as Mother, even without the sacred sword."

"Personally, I'd rather you didn't. I'd never be able to see you cry then."

"Oh, not that again."

She tries to smile, but Claude pinches her cheek gently. "You've gotten better at sidestepping lately."

"Gracious, are you complaining?"

"As your husband, it's a relief, but as a man, I'm not happy with it." Claude's misty white breath brushes her cheek. "I always want your heart to beat a little faster for me."

When she looks back slightly, his lips approach hers. As if to forestall their kiss, a tremendous explosion thunders from the old castle.

"....."

Claude heaves a bone-weary sigh.

"Wh-what happened?"

"Some mystery experimental apparatus that Denis made exploded, along with Elefas. It doesn't sound as if anyone was injured, but... Oh, Beelzebuth has drunk himself under the table, too, hmm?" Claude's arms begin to release Aileen's shoulders. "I'll just go check on—"

Aileen clings to his arm. Claude looks down at her, startled, and she averts her eyes slightly.

"...Haven't you realized, Master Claude?"

"Realized what?"

"It was two years ago today. At just about this time, I believe."

That was the day when, after Cedric had broken off their engagement, Aileen slipped away from the d'Autriche estate and traveled through the demon king's forest to his ruined castle, all alone.

"...Yes."

The day she met this man.

"O-on a day like this one, I really don't think it's proper for you to leave me."

"Even though you said nothing last year?"

"We weren't yet married then, so under ordinary circumstances, we couldn't be together at such a late hour! Besides...I've become empress. That is a dream I've held since childhood, and now it's come true. I've retaken everything that was lost with my broken engagement. But..." Aileen continues softly, "...You, Master Claude. You alone aren't mine yet."

Even though it's a night when scattered snowflakes fall, her face is blazing hot. She feels as if her whole body may burn up. However, she's convinced that this night will be her only chance to break through the barrier of that *All Ages* rating.

Tonight, the sequel of the moment two years ago when she attempted to change fate.

As she's praying that the painful silence will pass quickly, he suddenly scoops her into his arms.

"True. I haven't satisfied you yet."

"D-don't phrase it like that, if you please! Not that way; be more, you know..."

"More...?" he echoes mischievously, but she can't find an answer.

In the meantime, Claude has briskly returned from the balcony to the bedchamber. The balcony door closes on its own, then locks itself. As if at a signal, the lights in their bedchamber dim one after another until only the candles near the great canopied bed still glow, crackling quietly.

"How could I possibly love you more?" Gently, carefully, Claude lowers Aileen to the bed. "You, who brought me here."

“...Master Claude.”

“I feel as if I’ve only taken from you, never given. Ever since that day two years ago.”

“No, that isn’t so. I was only making my own dream come true.”

To that end, she overcame hardships and unwanted flags alike, until she looked up and found herself here. That was all.

Claude chuckles softly. “That’s just like you. So? What is your next dream?”

“M-my next...dream...?”

“That’s right. If possible, I’d like to be the one to make it come true. Just as you did for me.” Claude strokes her cheek gently. He probably means it.

Considering their current situation, she wishes he’d be tactful and guess, but the man is dense about odd things.

Her eyes wander uncomfortably, and then she resigns herself. She can tell she’s blushing. “M-my next...dream...is to...to surround you with a large family.”

Claude’s fingers have been toying with her hair, but at that, they fall still. Before she can cover her face from embarrassment, he leans over her.

The bed creaks under their combined weight. Their lips meet, and she stops being able to breathe.

She learned how to catch her breath properly, but that approach is useless here. His kiss is deep, and she’s already drowning. He’s tangled her tongue, stolen her breath, and there’s a delicate moisture in his sigh.

“Master...Claude...wait—”

“No, I can’t wait.”

The smooth sound of fabric against fabric. Her heartbeat, loud in her ears.

She knows nothing about what comes after this, and although his red eyes are always kind, they’re rather dark. All she needs to do is let him love her, and yet she’s a little frightened. “I-in that case, at least go slowly...”

“And here I’d planned to be gentle and spoil you and make you cry all night long.” His hoarse voice comes to her on a fervid sigh, breathed into her like a

long-cherished wish. “In the end, I’m always the one who’s undone.”

She looks at him, startled. Claude is smiling at her faintly, his expression troubled, as if he might burst into tears.

Her heart is still racing so fast, it feels as though it may break. However, she’s no longer afraid.

Aileen smiles back at him and gives him a little peck of a kiss. She was unbearably hot only a moment ago, and yet she’s cold already.

When the cheek that brushes hers or the hand that holds her own leaves her even briefly, she feels cold immediately.

“It’s because you overthink it. At times like this, all you need to do is be true to your feelings and say, ‘Let’s live happily ever after.’”

“...That’s right. You’re right.”

Her lips and fingertips and skin and everything else promptly melt into this man, growing warm.



“I love you. Let’s live happily ever after, Aileen.”

“Yes. Let us find happiness—Master Claude.”

And when dawn breaks, the next dream—the tale of their “happily ever after”—will begin.

Afterword

Hello, this is Sarasa Nagase.

Thank you for picking up my humble excuse for a novel. This is the sixth volume in the story of Aileen, the demon king, and their merry friends.

It's also the second half of the tale that began in Volume 5, or—in terms of the online edition—the second half of the fifth section.

There are quite a few things that would end up being spoilers if I put them into words, so I'll refrain, but I hope the book lived up to the expectations of everyone who's read this far.

If it makes you think, "That was entertaining, that was fun, I'm glad I read it," I'll be very happy.

And now for the thank-yous.

Mai Murasaki, who drew such beautiful illustrations: Thank you so much for the cover and interior art. I'd made requests regarding the illustrations for Volume 6, and you fulfilled them perfectly. As a matter of fact, you transcended them. In particular, on the cover, Claude has graduated from his constant hero companions (heh-heh!), and I really couldn't be more moved. Thank you for drawing Aileen and the others to be cute, beautiful, and dashing.

Anko Yuzu, who was in charge of the manga version: You showed Aileen and the rest of the cast in such vivid, lively ways, and your meticulous presentation was based on a deep understanding of the novel's story. I don't think anyone has ever been happier or more blessed with the manga adaptation of their work. I'm very fortunate indeed. Please continue to take good care of Aileen and the others.

My supervising editor: I'm deeply grateful to you for adjusting my schedule and supporting me so efficiently when I got completely turned around and

confused.

In addition, the proofreaders, the members of the *Kadokawa Beans Bunko* and *Comp Ace* editorial departments, the designers and marketing personnel, and everyone at the printer—everyone who was involved in the making of this book has my deepest gratitude.

Through letters and on Twitter, those of you who watched over the series encouraged me in real time. Thank you very much; please do continue to grant me your support.

Finally, to everyone who picked up this book: You are what enabled me to reach this point. Thank you so much. I'll keep working hard to write stories that you'll find entertaining, so please keep cheering me on.

Now then, in the hope that we'll meet again...

Sarasa Nagase

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